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edited by

ALFRED E. T. WATSON

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EDITED BY A. E. T. WATSON.

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JACK SNIPE



SNIPE AND WOODCOCK

BY

L. H. DE VISME SHAW

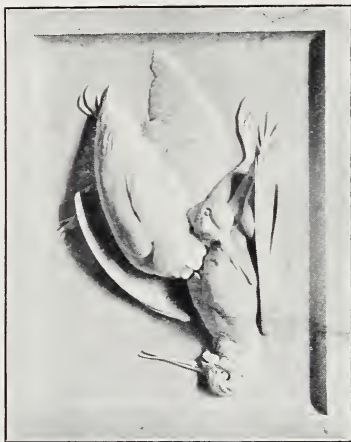
WITH CHAPTERS ON

SNIPE AND WOODCOCK IN IRELAND

BY RICHARD J. USSHER

COOKERY

BY ALEXANDER INNES SHAND



WITH EIGHT ILLUSTRATIONS BY ARCHIBALD THORBURN
AND CHARLES WHYMPER

LONGMANS, GREEN, AND CO.

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PREFACE

THE design of the *Fur, Feather, and Fin Series* is to present monographs, as complete as they can possibly be made, on the various English birds, beasts, and fishes which are generally included under the head of Game.

Books on Natural History cover such a vast number of subjects that their writers necessarily find it impossible to deal with each in a really comprehensive manner ; and it is not within the scope of such works exhaustively to discuss the animals described in the light of objects of sport. Books on sport, again, seldom treat at length of the Natural History of the creatures which are shot or otherwise taken ; and, so far as the Editor is aware, in no book hitherto published on Natural History or Sport has information been given as to the best methods of turning the contents of the bag to account.

Each volume of the present Series is, therefore, devoted to a bird, beast, or fish—except that in the present book two birds are included. Their origin is traced, their birth and breeding described, every known method of circumventing and killing them—not omitting the methods employed by the poacher—is explained with special regard to modern developments, and they are only left when on the table in the most appetising forms which the delicate science of cookery has discovered.

ALFRED E. T. WATSON.

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By L. H. DE VISME SHAW

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BY A. THORBURN AND C. WHYMPER

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NATURAL HISTORY OF THE SNIPE

BY

L. H. DE VISME SHAW

B

CHAPTER I

THE FULL SNIPE AND HIS COUSINS

WOODCOCK and snipe, or snipe and woodcock? The question is, which bird should be given precedence, which bird is the more important from the points of view of the ornithologist and the sportsman, and, one should add, from the point of view of the epicurean? For the ornithologist, both birds abound in interest. Both, though such closely related members of the same family, are widely distinct in habits the one from the other, and each has habits neither possessed by the other nor by any other British bird.

Of an immense group of familiar birds, a group made up of various distinct families, we can say that they have a fixed residence throughout the year; or, in the case of migratory birds, throughout that portion of the year which they spend within our islands, that they feed in a small radius, that they pair when the spring-time comes round and build their nests and carry food

to their young till the young are able to fly and feed themselves, that they dissolve the matrimonial bond when the breeding season is over, and then go on leading the same humdrum, stay-at-home life till another mating time greets them. We know all about these birds, we know all about their movements and their lives, and how they pass their time and why they come and go. Their habits in general are very nearly the same. Striking individual peculiarities we find, of course. The nightingale sings when other singing birds are asleep; the cuckoo lays her egg on the ground, and then, taking it in her bill, places it in the nest of some small bird, a nest which the young cuckoo when hatched quickly makes his own by unceremoniously ejecting the rightful inhabitants, casting them out to certain and speedy death and consuming the food that should have been theirs; the kestrel, motionless save for the beating of his wings, hangs hovering in the air, scanning the ground for his prey; the heron and the kingfisher rest still as logs for an hour at a spell as they watch for their food to come near them. Such birds have peculiar and strikingly marked habits which differentiate them from all others, and make them at once objects of more than ordinary interest. So it is with the woodcock and the snipe. But in addition to a peculiarly distinct habit

of each of these birds—carrying the young ones in the case of the woodcock, and drumming in the case of the snipe, habits which no other birds possess—we have a further peculiarity common to both of them, viz. their uncertainty, or erratic ways, uncertainty such as we never see displayed by the rest of the birds with which we are acquainted. The carrying of the young by the woodcock and the drumming of the snipe, the points upon which the question of ornithological importance seems naturally to turn, may be said to make the two birds of equal interest to the student of animate nature ; other things being equal, or just about equal, we can, from the naturalist's point of view, credit neither bird with that which would give it precedence before the other.

From the point of view of the epicurean, a ballot would place the woodcock easily first. But is there strict justification for giving the snipe only second place in this ? If the herring had been the rarest instead of the very commonest of all the fish we eat, and could only be bought at, let us say, the price we give for a lobster of respectable dimensions, it is quite probable that a Yarmouth bloater would now be held by our *gourmet* as the very king of fish, just as he holds the woodcock to be the very king of birds : if the woodcock had been as common as the lark, the

kinghood bestowed upon it by the *gourmet* would never have been called into existence—and the self-same epicurean would to-day think vastly less of a woodcock than of a Yarmouth bloater. Such is the nature of man : what is rare and hard to attain, that we strive for and value ; upon what may be had almost for the asking we set but little store, if indeed we do not altogether despise it. Is the woodcock more worthy of kinghood than the snipe, or has he merely gained his position because, while really he is a no greater delicacy, he is the very much rarer bird ?—is the snipe really less delicious than the 'cock ?

I doubt it : I think that if a dozen people who had never tasted either bird before were asked to decide the matter, two would vote for the 'cock as the better bird, two for the snipe as the better bird, and that the remainder would say there was nothing to choose between them. Though our epicurean would vote the woodcock into the foremost place, it is an open question whether the snipe would not have held that place had the relative abundance of the two birds been reversed. There is little doubt that appreciation of the woodcock is to some extent, we will say only a very, very small extent if you like, due to the fact that, though always by far the rarer bird, he was much more easily and more often secured for

the larder in pre-gunning days than was the snipe. The woodcock could then be caught easily, the snipe with difficulty. Hence the 'cock was a more or less common dish at the tables of the rich at that far-back time, while the snipe was an uncommon one, and the 'cock became the chief of familiar table birds. That position he has retained ever since ; and the diner of to-day holding the woodcock to be 'the very best bird that ever did fly,' we must grant the 'cock precedence before the snipe in gastronomic respect.

And from the point of view of the sportsman—the most important point of view of all. Here, again controversy would be endless. The woodcock is a bird comparatively seldom met with, very rarely met with throughout the greater part of the British Islands ; he is, as we have seen, considered greatly superior to every other bird from the point of view of the epicurean, a fact which gives him a special value all his own in the sportsman's eyes ; he is one of the most sporting birds to kill, many say the most sporting ; the gunner who is fortunate enough to bring a 'cock to bag while covert-shooting carries the honours of the day ; and the average sportsman thinks far more of killing a woodcock than of killing any other bird whatsoever. Thus, at first glance, it seems as though it should be said that the 'cock, from the

sportsman's point of view, is of more importance than the snipe, even perhaps that he is of more importance than any other game bird. Is it right, however, that the 'cock should be given precedence here? To every one woodcock killed in the British Islands, how many snipe are killed? Whatever the proportion may be, we can only say in the ordinary way of speaking that the 'cock is an uncommon bird and the snipe is a common one. Woodcock shooting proper is only within reach of the favoured few, favoured by wealth or locality; snipe shooting is engaged in by the many, for wherever there is low, wet land, there may the snipe be found. Where there will be twenty readers of these pages who have never the opportunity of doing more than killing a very occasional 'cock by the covert side, there will be but one who is ever able to take part in what may be strictly called woodcock shooting; while there will be but one who is able to take part in what may strictly be called woodcock shooting, there will be fifty who engage regularly in snipe shooting. Therefore, from the point of view of sportsmen at large, it is to be taken that the snipe is a more important bird than the 'cock. Both birds are equal from the ornithologist's point of view; and as the point of view of the epicurean is altogether less worthy than that of the sportsman, we will give

precedence to the smaller long-bill and discuss him forthwith.

There are two snipe abundant throughout the British Islands, viz. the full snipe, the common snipe, the whole snipe or the heather-bleater (*Scolopax gallinago*), and the Jack snipe, the half snipe, or the Judcock (*Scolopax gallinula*) ; there is one snipe which is comparatively a rare bird, viz. the great snipe, the double snipe, or the solitary snipe (*Scolopax major*) ; and there are two snipe, viz. the brown snipe, the red-breasted snipe, or the grey snipe (*Scolopax grisea*), and Sabine's snipe or the black snipe (*Scolopax Sabini*), which are so rare as visitors to us that only occasional specimens have been obtained.

SABINE'S SNIPE

It is now generally held by ornithologists that Sabine's snipe is not a distinct species, but merely a dark variety of the full snipe. The arguments in favour of this belief are, that the breeding ground of such a bird is unknown and that among the *Scolopacidae* variations in the tints of plumage are very far from rare. Possibly when northern latitudes are more thoroughly explored we may prove Sabine's snipe to be a true species. It took our antipodean relatives a century to discover the breeding place, Japan, of the

Australian snipe. If it were really true—and on the prime authority of Yarrell the assertion is often made and believed—that Sabine's snipe has only twelve tail feathers, its individuality as a species would be obvious, for it is certainly not a melanism of the jack, and both the full snipe and the great snipe have tail feathers in excess of this number. To set this matter finally at rest I consulted Doctor Bowdler Sharpe, who was kind enough to have an examination made for me of the specimens classified as Sabine's snipe at the South Kensington Museum. The result of this examination was that all the birds were found to possess fourteen tail feathers, the same number as that owned by the full snipe.

THE BROWN SNIPE

Perhaps a dozen specimens, perhaps a few more, of the brown snipe have been encountered in England: I know no authentic case of its occurrence in Scotland or Ireland. It abounds on parts of the American coast during the winter, returning to its breeding haunts in the extreme north with the advent of spring. The bird feeds almost entirely by the sea shore. Brown snipe keep in large wisps, and fly in close formation like the stint. Upwards of a hundred have been killed at a shot by American coast gunners.

The length of the brown snipe is about $10\frac{1}{2}$ in.; its weight about $3\frac{1}{4}$ oz. Mr. Beverley R. Morris describes its summer and winter plumage thus:—

In the summer, the plumage above is marked with black, cut into narrow waves of brownish yellow; the rump and tail coverts are white, the tip of each feather marked with a crescent-formed spot of black on the tip, and barred diagonally with the same colour; the tail is also white, slightly tinted with rufous, and with all the feathers barred with black. Beneath, the throat, neck, breast, and flanks are orange brown, each feather tipped and barred with black; these colours gradually disappear downwards, and the centre of the belly, with the vent, are pure white. In winter the plumage is of a greyish brown on the head and neck, deeper on the back and wings, and these, in some states, have the feathers edged with paler margins. There is a tint of rufous on the breast, but the lower part of the chin and belly are white. The tail and its coverts are similar in all states, a slightly deeper rufous tinge on the former during summer. The axillary feathers are white, barred with black; quills are deep hair brown; shafts of the first broad and white. It may be observed that, from the month of April until winter, various intermediate states of plumage are passed through, often very beautiful.

The brown snipe has twelve tail feathers.

• THE GREAT SNIPE

The great snipe is not, I think, quite so rare a bird as is often supposed; for so close is its resemblance to the full snipe, and so accustomed are

snipe-shooters to bagging large specimens of the full snipe, that there can be little doubt the great snipe frequently escapes recognition, unless those through whose hands the birds pass are especially on the lookout for it. Besides this, a vast number of people who engage in snipe shooting are quite unaware of the distinction between the two birds. While there are many who are ignorant of the existence of the great snipe as a separate species, there are not a few who, unacquainted with the true distinction, call any extra large full snipe a great snipe. On more than one occasion I have had my attention drawn by professional Norfolk wild-fowlers—who are very good field naturalists as a rule—to supposed great snipe which proved on examination to be nothing more than large full snipe. As an opposite instance, not long ago I looked over a selected batch of birds supposed to be only heavy specimens of full snipe, and found no fewer than three great snipe among their number. A fine specimen of the full snipe will weigh as much as a small specimen of the great snipe; the latter bird varies in weight to no less degree than the former.

A description of the plumage of the full snipe applies in all material details to the great snipe with the exception of the belly and the tail, the other differences being so small that in all of them the great

snipe may be exactly matched by specimens of the full snipe which, as is so often the case, depart in some detail or another from the standard shading. These two distinctions, those of the tail and the belly, guided by which one may infallibly and at once say whether a certain bird is a great snipe or a full snipe, are : that whereas the belly of the full snipe is pure white that of the great snipe is more or less mottled, and that while the full snipe has only fourteen feathers in its tail the great snipe has sixteen. Proportionately to its weight, the great snipe is shorter in the wing than the full snipe. Its beak is also slightly shorter.

The breeding grounds of the great snipe are Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Russia, Germany, and Holland. The birds reach us between mid-August and early November, and after resting for a shorter or longer time continue their southward journey, returning to their northern haunts in the spring. The large majority of our visitors are young birds. I do not think there is an authentic instance of a great snipe having been shot in our islands later than November. Those birds which visit us are stragglers from the main body, whose migrating line is eastward of our shores. The great snipe flies slowly and heavily, and without twisting ; the flights it makes are short, like those of the jack—indeed, its habits much more

closely resemble those of the jack than those of the full snipe. It utters no cry on rising. As one of its names implies, it is a solitary bird, scarcely ever being found in company, and then rarely with more than a single companion.

In parts of Sweden great snipe are very numerous, bags of fifty or sixty having been made in a day. I fancy the bird is more frequently met with in the eastern counties of England than in any other part of the kingdom ; and this is only what one would expect. It was apparently much more common in Scotland and Ireland at one time than now. The following, penned nearly sixty years ago by Major Walker, of Belmont, Wexford, is worth quoting, as it records an experience quite unheard of at the present day. From the writer's description of the bird, there can be no doubt at all that the snipe he shot were really great snipe.

The Solitary Snipe I have at different times shot here is much larger than the Common Snipe ; bill shorter ; plumage nearly alike, with the exception of the belly, which in the Common is white, but in the Solitary is speckled with gray and brown. It lies close, and when flushed makes no cry, flies steadily without twisting, and slower than the Common (probably from its fatness, and not being a shy bird), and pitches again, like the Jack Snipe, after a short flight of thirty or forty yards. I never heard a cry from it ; but

sportsmen abroad have told me it has one, not, however, resembling that of the Common Snipe. . . . In one winter, about fifteen years ago, Solitary Snipes were plentiful in the grassy lands of Hayestown, at the foot of the mountain of Forth, about four miles from Wexford. Every day I shot there, I got three or four birds ; since that time the ground has been drained, and all kinds of snipe have quitted it ; but I generally get a few elsewhere in the course of the winter's shooting in the county of Wexford.

The great snipe usually met with in the British Islands, being mostly immature birds, have their plumage lighter than that of adults. The males average about $7\frac{1}{2}$ oz. in weight ; the females about $8\frac{1}{2}$ oz. Specimens have been killed weighing as much as 10 oz.

The great snipe has never been known to breed with us.

THE JACK SNIPE.

Coming to the jack snipe, we find ourselves on more familiar ground, for the diminutive bird is well known to every one whose ways carry him into the haunts of snipe. Not that the jack is really so very common. Whether we shoot in England, Scotland, Ireland, or Wales, we do not perhaps encounter more than three or four jack to every hundred full snipe. It is a matter of constant observation that the jack is found in

fewer numbers every year. I do not think the total of the jack that now visit us in a season is more than half that of a season say five and twenty years ago. Whether the bird has really decreased in numbers must be considered an open question. On my own part I attribute the decrease in the total of our annual immigrants simply to the change of seasons that has taken place during recent years: the reason we now meet with comparatively so few birds is, not that the head of jack in Europe has undergone a diminution, but that every year a smaller number consider it necessary to seek such a genial wintering place as the British Islands. The food supply of the jack, as we shall see later, is not affected by the weather to the same extent as the full snipe's. During the mild and short winters of the present day, the jack picks up a comfortable living in countries where he could not have existed in the time of the old severe winters, and where the full snipe cannot exist even now.

The main body of jack reach us between the middle of September and the middle of October. It is often said that the jack snipe is the pilot of the woodcock—that when a jack is seen you may take your gun and expect to find a 'cock or two in some favoured haunt. This, however, is not correct. The autumn fall of woodcock does not take place till

from a fortnight to three weeks after the jack have begun to drop into the country. Of course a few 'cock are killed very early in the season. But there is no ground whatever for assuming that these are other than home birds; there is no evidence that the migrant 'cock have begun to arrive till we find them on the coast, and they have never yet appeared on the coast earlier than the first week in October. When 'cock come in as early as the first week in October, it is always during a season in which jack snipe have already spread themselves over the country a fortnight or so before that time. The jack snipe is the pilot of the woodcock in the sense that he reaches us first, but a fortnight after his arrival is quite soon enough to look for the 'cock that follow him.

Jack snipe leave us during the end of March and the beginning of April, by which time they have begun to assume their summer plumage.

While there have been certain supposed instances of the jack snipe having bred in the British Islands, not one of them has ever been satisfactorily proved. Nests have been found and those who found them have averred that their owners were jack snipe; but actual proof has always been lacking, and until such time as a jack is indubitably proved to be connected with a supposed jack's nest our minds must remain

open on the question as to whether or not the bird ever breeds here. The eggs of the jack snipe cannot be identified as jack snipe's eggs apart from their direct connection with the jack snipe itself. There have been various people who have testified to having seen jack in the months of June and July, but I think I am right in saying that no naturalist of repute has encountered the bird at such a season. A few stragglers—most likely birds which have failed to find mates—sometimes reach us four or five weeks before general migration begins; when a jack is killed early in August there is no ground for assuming that the bird passed the summer here.

The jack snipe breeds throughout Northern Europe, and when the winter comes is to be found in nearly all the countries visited by the full snipe, whose range will be noticed a little further on. Wherever in the United Kingdom there is a district frequented by the full snipe, there also will the jack be found.

The average weight of the jack snipe is a trifle over 2 oz. The bird measures about 8 in. in length. The bill is about $1\frac{1}{2}$ in. By its small size, its short bill, and its dark back, the jack may be distinguished at a glance from the full snipe.

The jack, differing entirely in this respect from the

full snipe, is partly a vegetarian. In open weather though worms, grubs, small snails and so forth constitute his principal fare, he never neglects to consume a certain quantity of vegetable matter ; in hard weather he increases his proportion of vegetable diet to counter-balance the deficiency in the available supply of other food. It is for this reason that at times, when full snipe are starved almost to skeletons, the jack—a fact at which people often wonder—remains as plump and jolly as ever. In the hardest frost one never shoots a jack which shows signs of having suffered from privation. Such is instinct : we cannot well doubt that if the instinct of the full snipe prompted it during a lengthy frost to eat what the jack eats, the system of the one bird would assimilate it as well as the system of the other, yet the one bird never conceives the idea of meeting hard times with a make-shift diet. The jack will eat various kinds of seeds as well as grass, moss, and other herbage.

A solitary and independent bird is the jack. He selects some particular haunt and there he remains lonely and self-sufficing. Jack snipe never gather into wisps like full snipe : though a dozen jack may occupy a small piece of marsh, the movements of any one of them are always quite unconnected with the movements of any of the others. The attachment

of both jack and full snipe to certain spots will be dealt with at due length in the shooting section of the book.

While the full snipe moves like lightning when on the wing, the jack snipe's flight is but one degree removed from sluggish. The jack seems to have no fear, and never to be in a hurry. Rising without a sound—the bird is always mute during its sojourn here—a jack flits leisurely away and drops again perhaps not a hundred yards from where he was flushed. I have seen a jack, missed with both barrels, fly a distance of a couple of hundred yards or so and then turn and settle again within thirty yards of the gunner. During the daytime—he does his journeyings by night—the jack is always a bird of short flights. Not that his wing power and staying power are anywise lacking, for they carry him huge distances at the times of the spring and autumn migrations. It is simply that the bird is dull and heavy by day and has but little instinctive fear of man, and also pays but little heed to the sound of a gun or the whistling of shot.

The close-lying habit of the jack has gained him among our neighbours across the Channel the name of 'the deaf-snipe,' the origin being, of course, that a bird which allows itself to be approached so nearly

was credited with inability to hear the sound of footsteps. By anyone unfamiliar with its habits, it might well be supposed that the bird was really deaf. So closely does the jack lie that one may literally almost tread upon a bird at times. Jack have often been caught with a landing net or a butterfly net when a dog has been standing at them. Yarell mentions a case, which I can quite believe, of a jack having allowed itself to be picked up by hand before the nose of a pointer.

THE FULL SNIPE

The full snipe is met with in every part of the United Kingdom where it can find conditions suited to its tastes. Its haunts are the bog and marsh, the sides of the stream or ditch or pond, the meadow with the springy bottom, the furrow-drained grass land on heavy soils, in fact, any spot where the ground is soft enough to be easily probed by the bird's bill and where there is water, however little, near at hand. I have known snipe in very wet weather congregate on ploughed fields in preference to their usual feeding grounds.

Besides being used for drinking—the snipe is a thirsty soul—water is required by the bird for the

frequent washing of its bill, which quickly becomes incrustated with drying earth. When such incrustation has taken place, the adhering matter not only interferes with the passage of the beak into the soil but also, no doubt, lessens the delicacy of its sense of touch when in the ground. Hence the snipe when feeding repairs to the water at frequent intervals for the purpose of cleansing its bill. The slime from the worms tends to form rapid incrustation. When a snipe is feeding by the water, the bird carefully washes a worm before swallowing it ; but when feeding at any distance from water, he devours the worm as it is, taking it by the middle and sucking it through compressed mandibles, the pressure eliminating the slimy earth, which adheres to the bill and hardens rapidly.¹ The snipe will spend many minutes cleansing his beak after feeding at a distance from water—and he usually has a thorough wash and brush up before

¹ I have several times known people wonder, both in print and verbally, why snipe should show themselves devoted to a bare peaty bog where worms could only be comparatively few and far between, and scorn rich meadow land not half a mile away, where a shallow spit taken anywhere would turn up three or four worms. The preference of the birds for the one place before the other is due to the respective presence and absence of water. Under normal conditions, they find enough worms in the peat ; when ravenous after a frost they flock to the meadow, but again ignore it when once more fat.

resuming his meal. The bird devotes a large share of his life to washing.

I have said, when dealing with the jack, that the full snipe never indulges in vegetarian diet. This assertion can be challenged on the authority of various people who have written on natural history matters. I may be wrong ; but until actual proof of the contrary comes under my notice, I shall continue in the conviction that the bird never under any circumstances feeds upon vegetable matter. During hard weather it is rare to find anything at all in a full snipe, and when something can be found, that something is only grit and a small mollusc or two. In open weather the contents of the bird sometimes disclose traces of vegetable matter, but the explanation of this I believe to be that the matter is not swallowed at first hand by the bird but has been already eaten by what the bird eats. If the bird took vegetable matter at all we should surely expect to find such matter in the crop during hard weather ; and this I have never known to be found.

When the full snipe is feeding in earnest, he gives attention to nothing but worms, which are his dietetic mainstay ; when feeding fugitively, after having for a time satisfied his enormous appetite, he will pick up almost anything belonging to the smaller animal

creation. After worms, he is apparently more partial to small mollusca than other things. It is said on good authority that even leeches have been found in his crop. The snipe's appetite and powers of rapid digestion fall but a little way behind those of the robin. A full snipe has been known, when kept in confinement, to demolish double its own weight of worms in a day.

Almost throughout Northern Europe and Asia, the full snipe breeds in enormous numbers. When the period of the autumn migration comes round the birds begin their southward journey, and in a short time spread themselves over the whole of the more southern part of Europe, nearly the whole of the mainland of Asia, and a large portion of North Africa. Their chosen Asian haunts are India and China ; their favourite home in Africa is Morocco, while Egypt also affords really good snipe shooting.

Our own migrants from the north begin to reach us in small numbers during the second week of October. The migration is at its height a week or a fortnight later, and ends about the first of December. These dates are to be taken as average dates only, for the time of the birds' coming is largely ruled by the weather. When winter sets in early in the north, snipe reach us before their average time, while very

open weather will lead them to defer their journey. They leave us again between the middle of February and the first few days of March. I have known snipe come in over the north Norfolk coast for a continuous period of three hours, all the birds taking the same line and the majority of them flying singly. When they were in parties, these parties seldom numbered more than half a dozen head. Sometimes as many as ten minutes would elapse between the passage of one bird or one party of birds and another. The stream ended as suddenly as it began.

Full snipe breed freely in various parts of the British Islands. For some years past the number of home-breeding birds has been steadily increasing. During open winters, those of our home birds which leave the country—I believe many of them do so however mild the season may be—never stray far afield, and return to us in the spring. Thus, given a succession of mild winters, the stock of home-breeding birds continuously increases. But when there comes a really severe winter, the birds are driven further and further south, and a large proportion of them never find their way back, so that the home-breeding stock of the following summer is largely reduced in numbers.

The date of the pairing of snipe is governed by the season. They may begin to pair as early as the end of January or as late as the latter part of March.

The nest of the snipe, which is nothing more than a cavity in the ground roughly lined with dead grass or other herbage and occasionally leaves, is made in some dry spot, generally under the shelter of a tuft of grass or a patch of furze or heather. Its situation is always adjacent to a favourite feeding ground. There are rarely more than four eggs, and handsome eggs they are. The ground colour varies considerably, from buff to pale olive; the larger end is mottled with different shades of brown. The eggs are always arranged with their points together in the centre of the nest. They are large in proportion to the size of the bird, measuring over an inch and a half in length. The period of incubation is about sixteen days. It is believed that the male bird takes no part in the sitting. As young snipe have been found as late as the middle of August, it seems as though two broods are sometimes raised in the season.

A few hours after they leave the shell, young snipe vacate the nest and follow the parent birds as they search for food. Sometimes an old snipe will feign disablement like a partridge, in order to entice an intruder away from the nest or the young. The

young birds are able to fly when about four weeks old. The Rev. J. G. Wood tells us that the mother bird carries her young out of danger, but I have never been able to find satisfactory evidence of such an occurrence. Probably the statement arose from confusion between the snipe and the woodcock.

It is often said and believed—frequently no doubt on the authority of the widely read and ever delightful ‘Natural History of Selborne’—that snipe are fatter after a few days’ frost than at any other time. Gilbert White has a quaint theory whereby to account for this supposed fact, attributing it to the restraining of the bird’s perspiration by the decrease in temperature. But as it happens, instead of being fatter after a few days’ frost, snipe are most appreciably thinner ; so long as their feeding grounds remain open the birds keep themselves as fat as they can possibly be, but, from the day that a check is placed upon their food supply, their fat diminishes rapidly. Probably some credulous friend or acquaintance believed, just as very many believe to-day, that snipe really become fatter after a few days’ frost, and then White set himself to work to think out an explanation of this fallacy assumed to be as a fact, evolving the aforesaid theory.

Snipe are at different times very tame and very

wild. As this more immediately concerns the sportsman, it will be discussed in the part of the book devoted to snipe shooting.

The snipe is both solitary and gregarious. At times we may meet with nothing but single birds or at most small parties of two or three or three or four ; at other times we may find all the birds in the district gathered into large wisps, when they usually bid defiance to all efforts on the part of the gunner, being quite unapproachable. Sometimes—looking as though it were due to instinct handed down from the days when hawks were many and gamekeepers non-existent—a wisp on rising will instantly scatter, the birds flying in various directions and returning after a while to their feeding ground in small parties. On other occasions one may find a small area thick with snipe, which, instead of acting in concert like a wisp and rising together, will spring up singly one after another ; half a dozen birds may be feeding only a few yards apart, yet each one will be up and off before another rises.

The full snipe is subject to considerable variation both in size and plumage. There are small snipe and large snipe, light snipe and dark snipe. The average weight of a bird is about 4 oz. ; its average length about $10\frac{1}{2}$ in. Specimens have been recorded weigh-

ing as little as 3 oz. and as much as 8 oz. Pied, cream-coloured and pure white snipe have been shot, and also birds having a well-formed crest.

Snipe not only vary in size as to the individual, but also as to the batch. With regard to the latter, I wrote in the 'Badminton Magazine' for November 1902 :—

I think few snipe shooters can have failed to notice the occasional large difference in the average size of birds killed in the same district. At one time they may be all very big birds ; at another they may be all very small. There can be little doubt that these different sized batches of snipe are migrants from different parts of the world ; one lot, for instance, may have come from Holland, another lot from Sweden.

Perhaps the finest batch ever obtained was that of Colonel Peyton, who, on January 8, 1879, killed twenty couple of snipe, which weighed collectively no less than 12 lbs., giving an average weight per bird of nearly 5 oz.—a highly remarkable bag. I once knew eight birds to be killed one after another which averaged just 5 oz. in weight.

At the first touch of sharp frost, snipe leave their more open feeding grounds and seek the margin of any water not yet affected. When the springs and streams freeze and remain frozen for a day or two the majority of the birds leave the country. Some make

their way to the coast, where they remain and feed for a while in company with the small waders ; others hang on and on to their inland haunts, picking up a terribly scanty living and becoming little better than skeletons. Snipe have been known to die in large numbers during a protracted frost. It seems odd that these birds, the migratory instinct so strong within them, should not make a start for a more genial climate with the others when hard weather comes in real earnest. Possibly they wait on hoping for a change, and then at last find themselves too weak to think of undertaking a lengthy flight. Snipe regain their flesh almost as rapidly as they lose it. Though mere skeletons at the break up of a frost, they are as fat as ever a week afterwards. They feed voraciously to make up for lost time, and find a limitless food supply, for after a frost the worms work up almost to the surface of the ground.

In one habit the full snipe differs diametrically from any other bird whose ways it is possible to observe closely. While other birds invariably rest with their heads to the wind, the snipe invariably does the reverse. Why, it is impossible to say. The bird, its shanks flat upon the ground and its beak pointing downwards and pressed against the breast, poses itself in the form of the letter V, the raised fan-like tail partly shielding the back from the wind.

CHAPTER II

PECULIARITIES OF THE SNIPE

‘SMALL wonder is it,’ I wrote not long ago, ‘that a bird owning such a prominent feature as the snipe’s beak should have taken its name from the feature in question. Most of the European languages, if not all of them, have endowed the snipe with an appellative based upon the eminent character of his bill, *e.g.* the French *bécassine*, from *bec* ; the Portuguese *narseja* from *nariz* ; the German *schneepfe* from *schneppen*—the last being the prime root of, or having perhaps a common prime root with, our own word snipe or snite.

‘Our modernised form of the word, pure Anglo-Saxon, is snout. On account of the conspicuousness of its snite, or snout, the bird became known as the snite. Later the *t* was gradually superseded by the *p*, but the supersession did not become entire till comparatively recent times. It has been said that even

less than a century ago the early form of the word, snite, was used by the rustics in certain parts of England. Lydgate, the Suffolk poet, wrote soon after Chaucer's time :—

All one to thee a falcon and a kyghte,
As good an owl as a popingaye,
A dunghill duck as dainty as a snyghte.

‘ Shakespeare, writing between a century and a half and two centuries later, adopted the more modern spelling, when he penned *Othello* :—

For I mine own gained knowledge should profane
If I should time expend with such a snipe.

‘ Sir John Harrington, however, contemporary with Shakespeare, used the older form. He says in his “ Epigrams ” :—

He loves your venison, snytes, quails, larks—not you.

‘ A very early instance of the substitution of the *p* for the *t* occurs in the Household Book of the Earl of Northumberland for the year 1512. The book records that snypes were bought at the rate of threepence a dozen. I wish I could buy them at threepence a dozen now ! ’

A rather strange performance, gone through by the snipe and not so very rarely witnessed by snipe

shooters, requires explanation, namely, the occasional apparent use of the bill as a lever on rising. It is quite a common thing, according to my own experience, to find people who believe implicitly that the snipe has the habit of springing from the ground on its beak ; otherwise that it often, if not generally—I have heard a poaching snipe shooter maintain that it does so invariably—puts the tip of its bill on the ground and then springs upwards, using the bill much as we use a jumping pole. I quite believed this myself in younger days before I ever had the opportunity of snipe shooting ; and when, not long after I began to burn powder among the long-beaks, I saw a snipe apparently execute the feat, I found full justification for the faith that was in me. I had with my own eyes seen a snipe rise on its bill, thereby receiving visual confirmation of all I had heard about the supposed habit of the bird. Time, however, set me thinking, and when light came to me I wondered at my denseness in not having already thought out the proper explanation, for this appears so simple and natural that it is difficult to imagine anyone not seeing through it at once.

One is walking, let us say, by the side of a dyke, at the end of which, at right angles, runs another dyke. As the end of the first dyke is reached, one

comes suddenly on a snipe which had hitherto been hidden by the bank of the second dyke. The snipe catches sight of you at the same instant that you catch sight of the snipe. The bird apparently uses its bill as a lever ; it throws up its tail, and seems for a moment to balance itself on its bill—and then goes off at a mad pace uttering its cry of alarm. Though to say that the snipe has the habit of rising on its bill is absurd, one has, during the brief time possible for observation, unmistakably seen this particular bird poised above its bill while the bill touched the ground.

The very simple and natural explanation is, that at the moment the snipe caught sight of you and you of him, he happened to have his bill thrust deep into the soil. Acting instantaneously under the impulse of sudden fear, and forgetful of everything else, he sprang into the air without first withdrawing his bill from the ground ; the consequence being that, while actually on the wing, he was held to the earth by the bill. When, at close quarters, one comes suddenly on to a snipe which chances to have its bill deep in the soil at the time, this always happens, for the bird never pauses to draw its bill before springing from the ground nor does it ever squat when all at once a human being appears in sight only a few yards away. Now and again one may

see a snipe, held by its bill, turn a complete somersault ; now and again one may see a bird hang above its bill for a second or more before the hold of the earth gives way. Everyone who shoots over ditch-drained country comes upon a snipe from time to time when the bird has its bill in the soil at the moment of discerning its pursuer near at hand, and, unless quite unobservant in such matters, he cannot fail to notice the unrehearsed acrobatic feat in which the bird engages. Hence the notion that the snipe has the habit of rising on its bill.

A playful bird is the snipe at times. When a few find themselves together on a bright sunny morning they will sometimes romp almost like young partridges. A Scottish writer said a year or two ago :

It may be interesting to know that I have seen the common snipe, numbers of them, alight on a branch of a tree which overhung a very marshy piece of grass-land. They repeatedly alighted on the branch and dropped to the ground, continuing this for at least three-quarters of an hour.

The snipe is a bird which if taken captive as an adult 'comes to hand' much more quickly than most others, if not more quickly than members of any family other than the finches. It makes, too, a highly interesting study when kept in confinement. Like

nearly all birds which in a state of nature subsist on various kinds of insects, the snipe will gradually accommodate itself to substitutes for its natural diet—and this is certainly a considerable convenience to its feeder, for supplying only a single bird with all the worms it can eat is a somewhat exacting task, to say the least of it. The substitution of other diet for worms, however, must be effected gradually, as it is some little time before a snipe will take at all kindly to unnatural fare. Even when a liking for other food has been created, I do not think the bird can ever be kept in really good health without a certain small number of worms. When first being broken in, it will swallow raw tripe cut into narrow strips while declining to have anything to do with other kinds of flesh. The snipe kept in confinement should be pinioned, or, under the influence of sudden fear, it is certain, sooner or later, to stun or kill itself against the roof of its dwelling. A small cage is quite unsuited to a snipe. Unless kept in a roomy aviary or allowed plenty of liberty every day, the bird will never do well. An unlimited supply of water both for drinking and washing is absolutely necessary. When once quite tame, the snipe is very tame with those to whom it is accustomed, and likes to be fondled by them, but generally shows fear of a stranger. The

bird delights in basking before a fire or in the rays of the sun.

The following account of a tame snipe, which appeared in the 'The Field' some years ago, is worth quotation :—

John Constantius Upham, Esq., of Starcross, Devon, has a common snipe which is extremely tame and familiar, and answers to the name of Jenny. In December last she was caught by some boys near the warren, and was brought to Mr. Upham in a starving state. She was recovered by forcing her to eat some very minute pieces of raw mutton. Worms having been procured, she soon commenced feeding herself, and eventually would follow Mr. Upham round the room for a worm. Her bath is a good-sized pie-dish, her *salle à manger* an eight-inch flower-pot, and her amusement probing a large damp sod of rushes placed for her fresh every day on a good thick piece of brown paper. . . . On our entering the parlour where she is allowed to run about, she evinced no alarm, and presently commenced feeding. The upper mandible of a snipe's bill being a little longer than the under one, it was with some perseverance and some difficulty that she picked up from the carpet a worm which was thrown to her. Except when she is very hungry, she generally washes the worms before eating them. The flower-pot is half full of earth and worms ; it is placed on its side. The snipe, when she feeds, probes the earth for a worm ; having caught one, she carries it to the pie-dish. After carefully washing it, she disables the worm by pinching it all over with the tip part of her bill ; then she takes it by the middle and

throws it back to swallow, in doing which the head of the worm is on one side of the bill and the tail on the other. The head and tail soon disappear, and the worm goes down double, even if it be as thick as a goose-quill. The snipe constantly goes in and out of the pie-dish, and probes round at its bottom with her bill. She frequently washes herself, throwing the water over her back and flapping and splashing it with her wings, after which she comes out of the dish and preens her feathers, spreading her tail like a fan, bending it round with great flexibility in a curious manner, and keeping it in constant motion. She is very fond of the fire, and stands before it on one leg for hours together. She has on two or three occasions exhibited symptoms of impatience at confinement by flying against the window ; on the last occasion she flew against the ceiling of the room with some violence, and came down much hurt, so that the feathers of one of her wings have been cut. Mr. Upham is getting a place made to collect and store worms ; her consumption of them is almost incredible, for she consumes in twelve hours nearly double her own weight. Three sorts of worms she takes, the dew worm, and two other small red sorts, the names of which are unknown to me ; the brandling, the lobb, the gilt-tail, or indeed any worm from a dung heap, she will not touch. She is also very fond of snail's eggs, very small young snails, woodlice, or small *planorbis*, and several other freshwater shells, eating shell and all ; she also picks up gravel like other birds. I watched the bird for more than an hour, and saw her eat more than twenty worms. The pie-dish is a blue one, and as it was thought to be not quite deep enough for her, a larger one was searched for ; but Starcross could not furnish a larger blue dish,

so a yellow one was bought, but she would not go near it ; it was even banked up with turf, but it would not do, so the old blue pie-dish was brought back to her again. Mr. Upham is keeping a diary, and notes down the habits and peculiarities he observes in his pet snipe ; he much fears she will not survive the ensuing summer. I was so much interested that I hope to pay the snipe another visit very soon.

A long, long controversy concerning one of the peculiarities of the snipe may now be said to have passed out of the realm of disputation, except as a matter for argument among those to whom the evidence on either side is unknown. This is the habit of drumming : the controversy was as to whether the drumming, or bleating, sound came from the bird's vocal organs or whether it was produced by other means.

I do not think anyone hearing a drumming snipe for the first time and being unfamiliar with what has been said upon the subject would ever for a moment doubt that the sound came from the bird's throat. It is quite a throat sound, a sound so closely resembling the bleating of a lamb or a goat that perhaps an untrained ear could detect no difference at all. It was the similarity between the drumming of the snipe and the bleating of a goat or a lamb that won for the bird its British name of 'heather-bleater' and its French

name of 'flying nanny-goat.' The goat and the lamb emitting from their throats a sound so nearly like the drumming of the snipe that anyone may be forgiven for mistaking the one for the other, it is but natural that people should have maintained through thick and thin that the snipe's drumming comes from the snipe's throat. Everything but one lends strength to the belief.

This one thing is, that the snipe *never* drums save when plunging head foremost towards the earth : no snipe has ever been heard to drum while resting on the ground, no snipe has ever been heard to drum while flying upwards or parallel with the earth's surface. The bird when flying at a greater or less height suddenly swoops obliquely, and as long as the swoop lasts the sound of the drumming is given forth. This at length led to the supposition that the sound was created by the wings and not by the throat, a supposition which was widely contested and denied, the chief arguments against it being that a sound of such a kind could never be produced by the wing vibrations of a bird, and that if it could be so produced, no bird of anything like the small size of a snipe could generate a wing sound of such volume as the snipe's drumming.

At a time when the vexed question was as far as

ever from settlement, the Rev. J. G. Wood (to the best of my knowledge the first to record such synchronisation of sounds), wrote :—

How this sound is produced has long been a controversy, but I am convinced that it is produced by the wings—at all events that it is not from the mouth. During a recent stay in the New Forest, I set myself to the elucidation of this problem, and in company with two friends went towards sunset to an excellent cover near a large marsh, in which snipes were almost as plentiful as sparrows. From this post we could watch the snipes to great advantage, and the birds would come circling over our heads, piping and drumming vigorously. On several occasions when a snipe was passing over us at so low an elevation that his long drooping beak was distinctly visible, he stooped directly over our heads and uttered his ‘chic-a, chic-a!’ simultaneously with the drumming, both sounds being distinctly heard at the same time.

Anyone wishing to assure himself by personal observation that the snipe utters its cry at the same time that it drums can do so, but he should know that the simultaneous occurrence of the two sounds is very far from common: one may have to watch birds for days before hearing it.

It being certain that the drumming is not produced by the snipe’s vocal organs, the question is: How does the bird produce it? Before entering

into this, however, let us first notice how a snipe conducts itself when drumming.

The snipe only drums during the breeding season, and then it is only the male bird who does the drumming. As far as my own observations have enabled me to connect a certain male snipe with a certain nest, I believe the bird begins to drum about a week before the first egg is laid, and continues to drum till about three weeks after the young are out of the shell ; but I would not have this taken as anything very far removed from guess-work. The bird drums more assiduously while the female is actually sitting, than at any other time. The snipe appears to me to have an ill-defined general rule that most of his drumming shall be done during three portions of the day ; the first portion beginning soon after daylight and lasting for from half an hour to an hour, the second portion beginning about one o'clock and lasting for from an hour to three hours, and the third portion about an hour before sunset and lasting till the sun has sunk below the horizon. There are many exceptions to this rule, if a rule it be.

The drumming snipe mounts to a certain height and then, while flying horizontally, suddenly takes a head-foremost dive obliquely towards the earth. This dive—the personal equation has plenty of scope here,

and my own conclusions may differ not a little from those of others—is never less than eighteen feet and never more than about thirty feet. The dive is ended by the bird suddenly throwing its body into a plane with the earth. This done, it generally flies horizontally for a few yards and then again mounts up to the level from which it took its dive. Soon after—one might say usually three or four minutes after, though the interval may be anything between a minute and an hour—the first dive, another dive is taken, and so on. ‘The drumming snipe,’ quoting myself again, ‘seems never to tire. Backwards and forwards, round and round, now up now down, so he continues to amuse himself by the hour. The nearer he is to one, the more is his drumming like the bleating of a goat or lamb; the further away, the more does it resemble an insect’s buzz or the vibrations of a twanged harp-string. There is an odd effect when conditions of atmosphere or of distance are such that the sound takes seconds to reach one. One sees the bird stoop headlong through the air, one sees him recover himself and speed away and upwards again, and then, but not till then, the buzzing created by his swoop is heard. . . . The volume of sound of the drumming of a snipe is not, I fancy, greater in proportion to the wing surface than the buzzing of

certain insects : increase the area of a blue-bottle's wings to that of a snipe's, and I think you would hear the buzzing of the mighty blow-fly at quite as lengthy a distance as that at which the snipe's drumming is audible. . . . I have estimated, while watching a snipe on the wing, that the drumming is to be heard at least three times as far away as the bird's note, and I have also estimated that on a clear still day the former sound is audible at quite half a mile. On such a day when the eye may no longer follow the bird the buzzing still reaches the listener's ear.'

And now back to the question as to how the sound is produced. The vocal organs having nothing to do with the matter, the sound must be created, (1) by the tilt of the bird's frame during the swoop, that is, by vibrations set up by wings and tail, or one or the other, as the consequence of their resistance to the air when held at a certain angle to the line of descent, (2) by wing action, that is, by vibrations aroused by the play of the wings against the air, (3) by vibration of the tail feathers, this vibration being generated, not by the simple passage of the body through the air with the tail feathers held at a certain angle to the line of descent, but by the current thrown upon the tail by the play of the wings, or (4) by con-



‘THE SWAMP, WHERE HUMM’D THE DROPPING SNIPE’

Tennyson.



tact of the tips of the wing feathers with the outer feathers of the tail.

The first of these finds an advocate in Mr. G. H. Storer, F.Z.S. (the original propounder of the theory, I believe) who wrote in the 'Badminton Magazine' of June 1899 :—

As snipe were plentiful, I spent much time during the early summer in studying their habits, and especially in trying to satisfy myself as to the means by which the male snipe produces the 'drumming' or 'bleating' which one so frequently hears during the breeding season. I soon convinced myself that the sound does not proceed from the mouth or vocal organs, as it is only produced when the bird is gliding through the air, and never, so far as my own observations have gone, when perching or at rest upon the ground. In this, I think, all observers will agree. There remain the wings and tail as possible agents in sound production. Now, if the snipe be carefully watched, it will be noticed that after he has soared to a considerable height in the air he will suddenly begin to descend, with half-closed wings and wide-spread tail, in an oblique direction towards the earth. This is the moment when the snipe beats his wonderful 'drum.' The sound does not at all suggest the 'whuz ! whuz !' produced by the vibrating pinion feather of the flying swan or the 'whirr' of the startled partridge or pheasant, as their wings beat the air ; neither is it made by clapping the wings back to back like the rising wood pigeon, or by striking the sides of the body after the manner of the American ruffed grouse. In fact, I do not imagine that the wings can in any way be considered

the musical instruments. Rather is the apparatus to be looked for in the tail. Examine the outer tail feathers of a snipe, and you will see at once that the shaft is strong and bent like a sabre, and that the outer web is stiff and very narrow, whilst the inner web is broad. Pluck out one of these feathers and fix it upon a stick. Now move the stick quickly, so that the outer web strikes the air obliquely as did the tail of the bird in life, and you will obtain a good if not very powerful imitation of the snipe's bleat.

Mr. Storer—I am sure he will not mind criticism in connection with a subject, bird life, in our knowledge with regard to which he is so keenly interested—hits upon a hitherto unsuspected probable agent in the production of the drumming of the snipe, but in doing so he misses the essential point. There is no doubt, as Mr. Storer says so, 'that a good, if not very powerful imitation of the snipe's bleat,' may be obtained if the feather be mounted on a stick and the stick moved quickly: and from this we may infer that if the entire tail of a snipe were dried in the spread position in which the drumming snipe holds it and were similarly mounted on a stick and the stick moved quickly through the air, an equally good imitation and a more powerful one would be afforded. But how quickly must the feather on the stick be moved through the air to produce the drumming sound, and

how quickly does the snipe stoop through the air while drumming?

Instead of swooping at high speed, the drumming snipe—the personal equation again here, please—does not exceed in his pace the initial pull of gravitation (16 ft. in the first second I believe is correct) by more than three to one; otherwise the bird does not descend at a greater speed than something like 50 ft. per second. I have had no opportunity of observing a drumming snipe for nearly a year, but sitting in my chair and imagining that I see a bird in its descent, I find myself doubting whether the pull of gravitation is ever exceeded by more than two to one. Be this as it may, we will say that the swooping pace of the drumming snipe is 50 ft. per second, and in saying so we may feel pretty confident that we are over-estimating the pace. The drumming of the snipe, from the moment the bird stoops till the moment it recovers itself, lasts just about a second, under rather than over, so that, according to our estimate of speed, the dive is a dive of about 50 ft., though, as I have said, I consider 30 ft. to be the limit length of a dive.

Now let us take the first handy object—it matters not whether it is a pound weight or a pen-wiper—and hold it at arm's length, and then let it fall to the ground, fixing the speed of the fall in our minds and estimating

what treble this speed will be, viz. about 50 ft. per second. After this, let us try what sound can be aroused by moving the feather on the stick through the air at our estimated 50 ft. per second velocity. None; we must multiply 50 ft. per second several times before we can extract even a faint sound from the passage of the feather through the air. Thus we find that if the tail feathers of the snipe play a part in the production of the drumming they do not do so by their simple passage through the air as the snipe dives, and we are compelled to abandon the theory that the sound might be created 'by the tilt of the bird's frame during the swoop, that is, by vibrations set up by wings and tail, or one or the other, as a consequence of their resistance to the air when held at a certain angle to the line of descent.'

Next we come to the theory that the drumming may be produced 'by wing action, that is by vibrations aroused by the play of the wings against the air.' The speed of the swoop of a drumming snipe does not in any way affect this question: the question hangs alone upon the speed of the beating action of the wings, the angles at which the bones of the wings are held relatively to the axis of the plane of the bird's body, and the angles at which the tips of the wing feathers are driven backwards and forwards through

the air. Let us call the bumble-bee as a witness in the question of speed. The hum evoked by the bumble-bee's wings is no greater when the insect passes swiftly by us than when it hangs almost motionless above a flower; the passage of its body through the air has nothing to do with the production of the humming. From the opposite side; rapid wing-beats do not necessarily imply velocity or even progress. The humming-bird and the hawk-moth are stationary while beating their wings at enormous speed; the kestrel beats his wings rapidly and does not move an inch, and the sparrow beats his yet more rapidly while hovering for a few seconds over some spot whereon he wants to light and in which danger appears to lurk. From all these witnesses together we find that the drumming snipe may beat his wings at very high speed without increasing his gravitational velocity by more than the ratio of the energy exerted by the humming-bird, the hawk-moth, the kestrel, and the sparrow, to counterpoise the pull of gravitation; if the practically stationary bumble-bee can produce his loud humming while only counterbalancing the pull of gravitation, 16 ft. per second, the snipe can, if he knows how, produce *a* buzzing when swooping downwards without increasing his pace to more than double the pull of gravitation—that is, he can, if he

knows how, hum as loudly while descending at the rate of 32 ft. per second as he could hum when descending at any pace. Probably, I think almost certainly, he could, if the drumming be produced by the wings alone, hum more loudly while descending at 32 ft. per second than if he descended at 64 ft. per second, for he could not increase his speed to 64 ft. per second without increasing the length of his quivering wing-beats, and any increase in the length of the wing-beats would necessitate a reduction in the rapidity of their sequence, hence a lessening in the volume of the sound of the humming. If all this holds good—I make no pretensions to scientific lore—there is no reason whatever why the snipe should not, as is almost universally believed by those who have studied him, produce his drumming by means of his wings and by means of his wings alone.

The third theory I have given is that the drumming sound may be the outcome of 'the vibration of the tail feathers, the vibration being generated, not by the simple passage of the body through the air with the tail feathers held at a certain angle to the line of descent, but by the current thrown upon the tail by the play of the wings.' The argument in favour of this theory is: that we find no sound resembling the snipe's drumming produced by the wings of other

birds, and that this being so, and considering that while every imaginable angle of (a) the frame of the wing relatively to the body, and of (b) the striking of the air with the tips of the wing feathers, must now and again be assumed by familiar birds in some of their vagaries of flight, and as not one of these birds ever produces a single bleat, it is unlikely that the snipe should make the sound with its wings alone.

If this theory as to the production of the drumming sound by the snipe be correct, we may say that the snipe's wings bear much the same relation to the snipe's tail during the process of sound creation that the child's vocal organs bear to the paper-covered comb which it presses to its lips : the child generates with its vocal organs certain vibrations which in turn generate vibrations as they strike upon the paper, and the blending of these vibrations creates a sound which could neither be created by the vocal organs alone nor by the paper and comb alone if the paper and comb were subjected to any vibrations other than sound vibrations. To put it simply, the drumming snipe sings into its tail with its wings as the child sings into the paper-covered comb with its vocal organs. It may be said by some who are having the patience to follow me that the bird may merely blow upon its tail with its wings, thus setting up in the

tail feathers vibrations of sufficient rapidity to produce the drumming. Perhaps. But the nature of the sound of the drumming is far more suggestive, to my own way of thinking, of the tail being a transmitter of sound than a first creator of sound, as the paper-covered comb is the transmitter and not the first creator. When the snipe is stooping through the air, it holds its wings about half closed, and spreads its tail like an open fan. In this position, all the current produced by the vibrating of the wings falls upon the outer feathers of the tail, whereas if the wings were extended laterally, as they are in ordinary flight, the spread tail would not receive more than about a quarter of the current. Thus we see how absolutely the position assumed by the drumming snipe fits in with the theory that the bird sings into, or perhaps merely blows into, his tail with his wings in order to create the sound.

The last of the four theories I have set forth is that the snipe's drumming may be produced 'by contact of the tips of the wing feathers with the outer feathers of the tail.' There is much more in this idea than might be supposed at first glance. One can—the personal equation once more, please—never say for certain whether when a snipe is drumming the wing feathers are brought into contact with the outer

tail feathers or whether they are not. If they do touch, it is only a question of sufficiently rapid wing action and sufficient resistance and resiliency in the feathers to produce sound waves resembling those of the drumming. It is to be noted, first, that the only way in which a snipe could bring the stiffest feathers of its wings into contact with the stiffest feathers of its tail is by spreading the tail as it is spread while drumming and half closing the wings as they are half closed during the swoop ; and secondly, that, to the highest degree of probability, a bird in this position could not make progress through the air at all except in a downward line, this explaining why we never hear any other bird drum in any of its vagaries of flight.¹ If ever photography were to prove that the wing feathers and tail feathers are brought into contact by a drumming snipe, I should consider it quite conclusive evidence that the sound is produced by such contact. Whatever the exact means whereby the drumming is created, it may be taken as quite certain that the wings are the prime

¹ A swooping bird other than a drumming snipe keeps its tail tightly closed. When checking its swoop it spreads both wings and tail. Either both wings and tail are closed, or both wings and tail are open. If it ever does bring the feathers of half-closed wings into contact with feathers of a spread tail, there is no wing action to produce sound from the contact.

agents in its creation, if they are not the sole agents, and it may be taken as probable to the very highest extent that the tail is a sub-agent.

Many snipe fall to the British poacher's gun. Snipe ground is so often only preserved in such a more or less haphazard manner that the poacher has not very much to fear. In Ireland our poaching friend has frequently to all intents and purposes a free hand to shoot snipe when and where he will ; in England the nature of the country whereon snipe most do congregate—the bare marshland of the river valley—lends itself admirably to his schemings. Even when there happens to be a keeper or a tenant on the watch, only very hard swearing can convict a man of having been out of bounds half a mile or a mile from where the swearer stood, or of having shot and picked up a snipe the same distance away. Coming to close quarters with a poacher under such circumstances is a matter of extreme difficulty ; catching him red-handed is almost impossible. I know of men who gain a good many sovereigns in the winter by boating in tidal rivers and, watching their opportunities, making short and frequent trips over likely parts of the marshes. Their game proves a safe and a paying one ; they never stray far from the river bank, and if a keeper or a watcher is seen striding

towards them in the distance, they are quickly back into the boat and drifting down stream, trolling for pike. Keepers are very shy of making a case out of such material.

Of course immense numbers of snipe are shot by holders of ten-shilling licences, those who shoot them being, I think, quite as often as not unaware of the fact that one may not legally kill snipe without a game licence. Even the police, as far as my own experience goes, are generally either ignorant of this or in doubt upon the matter. Not many miles from where I am writing holders of ten-shilling licences year after year kill snipe openly within 150 yards of a police superintendent's windows. Snipe are very often trapped in small gins set just under the water by the margins of streams or pools frequented by the birds. I once knew a man who frequently made several shillings a week by trapping snipe, and this without leaving his cottage garden, the end of which was bordered by a small shallow stream. Snipe are also snared by throwing up a ridge of earth at right angles to a stream or other water, leaving a narrow gap in the ridge, and then setting a trap or springe in the gap. The birds, instead of surmounting the ridge, pass through the gap, and are thus made captive. Whether snipe are now ever netted in any

part of the kingdom I do not know. The following deals with a time long past:—

Snipes in the Cambridgeshire fens were, thirty years ago, most abundant; those brought to Cambridge market, which at that time were all shot birds, sold at threepence to fivepence each. In 1775, the compiler [a Mr. Daniel] killed, in three mornings, thirty-three couple of snipes; and, from having known his father's men catch them by drawing with a net in the night-time, he mentioned to a person near Milton Fen his surprise that this mode of taking them had not been resorted to. The fenman inquired what sort of a net was to be used, and was told a lark-net would answer the purpose of a trial; this the fenman soon borrowed, and the first night of his making the experiment caught as many snipes as a small hamper could contain. The practice soon became general, and the netted were so much better than the shot birds, that the latter would scarcely find a purchaser in the market.

The twisting of the snipe on rising is one of the bird's most prominent characteristics. On springing from the ground a snipe covers a certain distance in a certain direction, nearly always against the wind. 'Until the first twist,' I once wrote, 'one wing—let me say the left—is held on a higher plane than the other. This tilting of the wings and body—the under surface of the left wing receiving the full force of the wind—curves the bird's course slightly to the right. There is a lightning-like twist to the left, when

the tilt of the bird is reversed, the under surface of the right wing coming to the wind and the bias of the line of flight being now towards the left. The following twist again reverses matters ; and so on, till at length the bird settles down into a straight line. I should like to elucidate this by means of a diagram, but it could not then be taken as representative of the way in which a snipe always flies when sprung, for the bird is erratic to a high degree in all things. . . . The object of the twisting of a snipe is to take all possible advantage of the force of the wind. He rises against the wind in order that he may mount the air more rapidly and more easily, for by facing the wind he not only has the help of the raising power of the wind itself, but he has also—his trend being upwards—the force of the current, as well as ordinary atmospheric resistance, against which to play the leverage of his wings ; he twists in order to add to the advantages of the raising power of the wind, and the increase of leverage provided by the resistance of the current, the further advantage of receiving, not actual propulsion from the wind itself as a tacking boat is propelled by the wind, but still appreciable indirect assistance in the form of a lessening of the friction of the cleavage of the air, effected by holding the wings at such an angle.'

So capricious are snipe in their movements that no one can say whence they come and whither they go, or why they come and why they go. Many have endeavoured to fathom the mystery of their movements, but none has succeeded. A certain bog or marsh may teem with snipe one day, and the next day—and perhaps for weeks—may be entirely deserted; the birds will suddenly appear scattered over a given large district, and as suddenly disappear. Their coming and going cannot be attributed to mere caprice, as it could in the case of a single bird or a wisp; their movements are induced by some common cause. A wind between north and east generally brings them to our English snipe-grounds, a change of the wind to a milder quarter being nearly always the signal for the prompt disappearance of all save the small body of regular residents.

SHOOTING THE SNIPE

BY

L. H. DE VISME SHAW

CHAPTER I

THE GUN AND THE CHARGE

IN the whole realm of sport there is no matter so controversial as snipe shooting. Whoever the writer may be, and, unless he restricts himself to mere generalisations, whatever he may write, he will always find plenty of people who hold views other than his own. Snipe shooting is a difficult subject. I must do my best from my own point of view, and, with the foreknowledge that a certain proportion of readers are sure to differ from me in details, console myself with the reflection that I shall but be in the same gallery as that occupied by other scribes who have gone before.

Let me first of all take into consideration the question of armament.

I have at times regularly used a 20-bore, a 16-bore, and a 12-bore on snipe (I have also killed snipe with

such extremes as a .410 and a 6) and have seen a good deal of the performance of small bores, for snipe shooting, in other hands ; and the conviction I have had forced upon me is that an average shot will kill fifteen or twenty per cent. more birds with a 12-bore than with a 20-bore. Snipe shooting is a different thing from nearly every other kind of shooting. A first-class shot can walk up September partridges and kill nearly as large, never quite as large, a proportion of birds with a 20-bore as he would kill if shooting with a 12-bore. Such shooting is a matter of pure skill ; if the gun is held right, the bird comes down. Snipe shooting is very often not a matter of pure skill ; though the gun is held right, the bird may escape scot-free. The partridge does not twist ; the snipe does twist ; and it is this twisting habit of the latter bird that gives the 12-bore its great superiority over the 20-bore as a gun for snipe. Of those snipe which twist as the shot is fired, or the instant after the shot is fired, a large proportion are brought to earth by the larger killing circle of the 12-bore which the smaller killing circle of the 20-bore would leave untouched.

The 12-bore being a better gun to use for snipe shooting than a gun of any smaller gauge, let us now consider what patterns it is best that the

barrels should give. With choke boring a perfected art, we can command any pattern from the 120 or so ($1\frac{1}{8}$ oz. No. 6, 30-in. circle, 40 yards range) of the cylinder to the 230 or so of the full choke: we can have anything between a barrel that will put upwards of five-sixths of the charge into the 30-in. circle at 40 yards and a barrel that will put less than half the charge into the circle.

In considering the choice of patterns for snipe shooting there are various points we have to weigh. The snipe is a very small bird and will often escape if the pattern is too open. If, on the other hand, the pattern is a close one, though the chances of killing the bird, it being assumed that the aim is correct, are greater than would be the case if the pattern were open, the bird is less likely to be within the killing circle of the close pattern than within that of the open one. As the result of considerable experience in snipe shooting, I am strongly in favour of having the right barrel an improved cylinder, pattern about 140, and the left barrel a full choke; and I believe that whether the gunner be a good shot, a bad shot, or an indifferent shot, he will do better work on snipe with such a gun than with any other. There are, however, many good snipe shots who prefer a gun both barrels of which throw a close pattern. 'You

can always give a snipe law,' I have often heard it said, 'and if the birds are wild you will certainly do better with two choked barrels than you would if you had one barrel a cylinder.' This is not quite correct. In perfectly open country you can, of course, always give a bird law, but many of the best snipe grounds are not quite open country. The snipe has a most unhappy knack of placing some obstacle—a stunted blackthorn hanging over the streamlet or a pollard willow beside the dyke—between itself and the gunner, and it frequently happens that the favourite spots of snipe are just those very spots where such obstacles exist, and where only shots at short range can be had unless the gunner knows his ground well and flushes the birds while yet some distance away.

I call many such spots to mind, spots where a snipe may always be found when there are any birds at all in the district. One, for example, is a sharp bend in a small stream where stand three willows very close together. From whatever direction one approaches, the birds on rising from this spot will nearly always instantly place the willows between themselves and the gun and make good their escape. The only way to ensure a shot at fair range is to come to a standstill some distance away and throw a stone into the stream. When walking over country where obstacles of this

kind are in existence it not at all infrequently happens that you must either kill your snipe at twenty yards or twenty-five yards or lose the shot altogether ; and at such a range, while a cylinder will not materially damage the bird, a full choke would cut it about badly. But this is the least part of the argument against the use for snipe shooting of a gun which throws a close pattern from both barrels.

Let us now imagine ourselves to be walking over quite open country. If the snipe be inclined to lie, we are much more likely than not to find them lying very well indeed ; if they be not inclined to lie, we are much more likely than not to find them lying very badly indeed. First we will suppose them to be lying well. We flush a few single birds at twenty yards or so, and then a couple rise simultaneously near at hand. As we are shooting with the gun I have recommended, we kill the first bird at a range of twenty-five yards or less and then have ample time to deal comfortably with the second bird at a range of from thirty yards to forty yards. The snipe is not a loiterer on the wing : it is a rare thing, according to my own experience, to see a right and left of snipe killed, the birds having risen together and flown in the same direction, with a distance of less than seven yards between the ranges at which the shot reaches

them. Moderately steady shooting brings the distance up to about ten yards, taking the average of a number of shots. Pretty frequently, so uncertain is the snipe's flight, the distance is as much as fifteen yards. If, on the other hand, we are using a gun highly choked in both barrels, and these two snipe rise near at hand, we hesitate to fire at the first bird at a less range than thirty yards or a little over, and then, with all the uncertainties of the flight of the bird and the speed at which it travels, we stand an excellent chance of failing to put in the second shot till bird number two has passed beyond certain killing range. The one gun allows us yards more in which to kill our two birds than the other—unless we cut the first bird to pieces with the right barrel of the choked gun—and gives us a much better chance of killing them. A snipe, however near to us it rises—the nearer it rises, the more, as a general rule, will it twist—is rarely too near to shoot with a cylinder barrel by the time one has decided upon a certain moment as the psychological moment for pulling the trigger; a snipe is always too near to fire at with a full choke till it has reached a range of thirty yards. When snipe are lying well, steady shooting allows one to put the charge on the large majority of the birds at a range of thirty yards; and at that range the cylinder

barrel, granted that its shooting is up to the mark and the right size of shot is used, will make certain of a snipe if held straight.

Now let us imagine ourselves to be walking over the same ground when the birds are not lying well—as I have already said, when snipe are not lying very well they are much more likely than not to be lying very badly indeed. In this case, as they are lying badly, nearly all of them rise well out of range. The occasional shot we are able to take is scarcely ever at a less distance than forty yards, and it is here that the gun having two choked barrels claims superiority; for with it we can occasionally kill a right and left, or kill with the second barrel a bird that has escaped the first charge—the closest shooting choked barrel ever bored is far from certain of stopping a snipe at forty yards.

But this must be borne in mind: When the gun with the cylinder right is the more desirable gun, that is when we find the snipe lying well, we have probably ten, perhaps twenty, times as many shots as we have when the gun with the choked right would be the more desirable gun, that is when the birds are lying badly. Thus we may say roughly that, taking one day with another, in something like nine out of ten of our total of

shots we are better off with gun number one in our hands when snipe rise before us than we should be with gun number two.

It is worth while giving a summary of the foregoing.

1. The larger the killing circle, the more satisfactorily does a gun act on snipe. Therefore, a 12-bore is a better gun for snipe shooting than a gun of any smaller gauge.

2. A gun having the right barrel a cylinder and the left barrel a full choke is the best gun to use for snipe shooting, because (*a*) the cylinder barrel enables one to kill birds at ranges at which they would be badly damaged if shot with a choked barrel, while at the same time it is effective up to a range at which most snipe may be killed when the birds are lying; (*b*) its large killing circle means the highest possible percentage of kills at moderate ranges; (*c*) when the birds rise together, the cylinder barrel, by allowing the first bird to be killed at short range, gives the gunner comfortable time to put in his shot from the left barrel before the second bird passes beyond certain killing range.

3. A gun choked in both barrels is not desirable for snipe shooting because (*a*) it does not allow a

bird to be killed satisfactorily at short range; (*b*) at any range up to that range at which a cylinder barrel is effective, the choke barrel will, on account of its smaller killing circle, yield a smaller percentage of kills than the cylinder barrel; (*c*) when the snipe rise simultaneously, the frequent necessity of giving the first bird law materially diminishes one's chance of killing the second bird.

4. When snipe are lying badly the gun choked in both barrels is more serviceable than the gun which has the right barrel a cylinder. This advantage, however, weighs very lightly against the disadvantages already stated. 'When the gun with the cylinder right is the more desirable gun, that is when we find the snipe lying well, we have probably ten, perhaps twenty, times as many shots as we have when the gun with the choked right would be the more desirable gun, that is when the birds are lying badly. Thus we may say roughly that, taking one day with another, in something like nine out of ten of our total of shots we are better off with gun number one in our hands when snipe rise before us than we should be with gun number two.'

For three months at a stretch I shot snipe regularly with a gun full-choked in both barrels, a sufficient test to warrant the forming of strong

opinions on the subject of choked barrels for this kind of shooting. My average worked out very badly. Killing a right and left, or, putting in the second barrel at a bird one has missed with the first, is very frequently quite a different thing in the case of snipe from what it is in the case of walked-up partridges. In the latter case, the birds fly straight, and you can fire at any moment you choose; in the former case, you cannot tell how your birds may fly; and the moment at which you must fire, if you are shooting at all steadily, rests with the bird and not with you. I found the necessity of having to hang on to the first shot largely responsible for my bad average. One may, time after time, find one's self dead on a bird at a range at which it is not too near for a cylinder, but too near for a choke, and, failing to pull the trigger at that moment, the bird may travel many yards further before a satisfactory shot can be had.

The gun used for snipe shooting should fit the shooter thoroughly. There are few people who do not shoot below their possible best if they use a gun which fails to fit them in every way.

I am no advocate for a very light gun for snipe shooting. A light gun possesses recommendations

when the going is rough or treacherous, but on no other score. A light gun is conducive to rapid shooting and unsteady aim, whereas steady shooting and steady aim constitute the very essence of successful work on snipe. Let the gun be of ordinary weight and with 30-in. barrels. When, on account of the user's want of strength and stamina, a reduction in weight is really necessary, let the gun be a feather-weight 12-bore, shooting reduced charges.

And now as to the size of the shot that should be used for snipe shooting.

Years ago there were sung to me praises of the deadly effects wrought upon snipe by the use of No. 10 shot. So emphatic was he who sang these praises that, always open to make a full test of anything connected with gunning, I decided at once to give this small shot an exhaustive trial. There happened to be plenty of snipe about at the time. The results, as I had anticipated from the first would be the case, were deplorably unsatisfactory. Up to a certain range, perhaps as lengthy as twenty-five yards, the birds were killed clean enough, but beyond this certain range bird after bird was wounded. Some would fly a few hundred yards and then drop ; others, visibly cut about by the shot, would take themselves off as though nothing had happened. Two or three jack were

among the wounded ones. As may be imagined, it was but a short time before I discarded the No. 10 in disgust.

Later on I made a full trial of No. 9 shot for snipe shooting. Though far less objectionable than the No. 10 had proved itself to be, I found it a long way behind No. 8 in its general effects. At ranges at which birds would have been killed clean with No. 8 they were in many instances killed anything but clean with the No. 9. The lighter the shot, the more rapidly does it lose velocity ; the loss of velocity of No. 9 shot is such that it ceases to retain the requisite degree of penetration, even for such a small bird as a snipe, at anything beyond very moderate range.

No. 7 is a most useful shot when one is walking after snipe over country where shots at other game are likely to be had. But for snipe shooting proper it is not suitable. It is unnecessarily heavy in the first place ; in the second place, it gives too open a pattern. At forty yards, a No. 8 pellet has still velocity enough to kill a snipe as clean as a No. 7 pellet—unless perhaps the birds were struck in some non-vital part, as, for instance, along the back, when the greater shock of the No. 7 pellet might bring it down and the less shock of the No. 8 pellet fail to do so—and for game shooting the performance of shot at ranges

exceeding forty yards is never worth consideration. No size of shot can compare with No. 8 as snipe shot. Its pattern is close enough, its penetration is sufficient—and this is all one needs.

There are many who believe that the slightest blow from a shot pellet will bring down a snipe ; they would have us assume from what they say that such a thing as a wounded snipe is almost unknown, and that, other things being equal, the snipe is more readily killed than all the rest of the bird creation, the woodcock alone excepted. ‘A snipe is never too far off to shoot at,’ I have heard repeatedly, but I have never heard it said by anyone who has had much experience among snipe. The question is an interesting one, and worth examination.

I may say at once, as the result of a pretty wide experience of snipe shooting, that, other things being equal, I believe the snipe to be no whit more readily killed than the partridge. Of course everyone knows that, other things being equal, some birds require more shot, possess greater vitality—to use a common term, are ‘tougher’ than others. Given, for instance, a wood-pigeon and a partridge of the same weight, the wood-pigeon needs more shot than the partridge. The wood-pigeon may be, and I think undoubtedly is, actually a tougher bird than the partridge, harder

in flesh and muscle, harder in frame and bone. Nevertheless, I am quite convinced that constitutional vitality has much more to do with the difference than actual toughness. What apparently less 'tough' bird, what apparently more delicate and easily killed bird, what apparently more tender framed and tender fleshed bird than the golden plover; and yet what bird, other things being equal, more difficult to kill? As a matter of fact, the golden plover, other things being equal, is just about the 'toughest' bird in existence. The 'toughness' in the case of the golden plover can only be attributed to excessive vitality.

Harking back to the snipe: In a way appearances tend to lead to a belief that wounded birds among partridges are in far greater proportion to the birds hit than are wounded birds among snipe. One has two shots at partridges; the first bird is winged, the second bird flies 150 yards and then runs 200 yards further before it is picked up in a dying condition. It takes some time before both birds are gathered. Later on one has two shots at snipe; the first bird is winged, the second bird flies 150 yards before it touches the ground. We walk on and find each snipe within a few feet of where it fell. And to what are appearances inclined to point? I almost

fancy I can hear the remark at the end of the day : 'What tough brutes partridges are compared with snipe ! Look at that brace of runners we had in the morning—we wasted getting on for half an hour over them. And then look at those two snipe in the afternoon. The slightest blow will settle a snipe.' But such a case does nothing whatever to show that, other things being equal, a snipe is more easily killed than a partridge ; it does nothing whatever to show that the partridge has greater proportionate vitality, or that, other things being equal, it is a 'tougher' bird than the snipe. All it does is to demonstrate how very much more serviceable a pair of legs the one bird has than the other. The partridge can run at high speed, the snipe can merely toddle ; the wounded snipe is gathered with ease, the wounded partridge with difficulty—and thus appearances may lead, and do lead, people to the belief that scarcely more than a scratch will kill a snipe.

Other things being equal. Though the loss of muzzle velocity in a No. 8 pellet at from thirty to forty yards is greater than the loss of muzzle velocity in a No. 6 pellet, I hold the belief that at this range, from thirty to forty yards, the No. 8 pellet exercises greater proportionate effect upon the body of a snipe than the effect exercised upon a partridge's body by a

No. 6 pellet. If this is true there should be a higher average of wounded birds among partridges than among snipe. By wounded birds I mean all birds that are not killed quite clean. I think there is a slightly higher average, but only slightly higher; and if the average is only slightly higher, and if the No. 8 pellet exercises greater effect—proportionately—upon the body of a snipe than the No. 6 pellet on the body of a partridge, then the snipe is, other things being equal, not only as ‘tough’ a bird as the partridge, but ‘tougher.’ There is one other thing the reader may consider: that the proportion of birds which come into contact with the central and harder-hitting pellets of the charge is probably greater among partridges than among snipe; the more erratic flight of the snipe should ensure that it is more often struck by the weaker outside pellets than the partridge.

It is quite a fallacy to imagine that the slightest blow will kill a snipe; and it is quite as unsportsmanlike to fire at a snipe at anything beyond fair range as it is to fire at a partridge unless the bird be well within shot.

The briefest of paragraphs on the question of loads. Do not make any reduction whatever in the standard charges of powder and shot. Many people

use only an ounce of shot for snipe shooting, and some even less. On just that little difference between $1\frac{1}{8}$ oz. of shot and 1 oz. there often hangs the question as to whether you kill your bird or whether you do not.

CHAPTER II

SNIPE SHOOTING

WE are all agreed as to what are the correct proceedings with regard to pheasant shooting, partridge shooting and so on. One may find differences of opinion with regard to guns and ammunition, but as concerns the ways in which the game should be walked after or brought to the guns and the way in which it should be shot we are unanimous—to all intents and purposes. But when the subject of snipe shooting is touched upon we immediately find ourselves in the region of controversy. A says, ‘You should invariably walk down wind on snipe,’ while B says, ‘When walking after snipe, you should always walk up wind’; C says, ‘Always shoot at a snipe the very first moment you feel that you are likely to kill the bird,’ while D says, ‘Never think of pulling the trigger till a snipe has settled down into straight flight.’ A, B, C, and D all believe implicitly in their respec-

tive tenets, and practise them. They are also, as likely as not, all of them successful and experienced snipe shots. How then are these widely removed differences of opinion to be accounted for?

I think the correct answer to the foregoing question is: A born shot who has the necessary practice among snipe will acquit himself in every way satisfactorily whether he adopts and carries into systematic effect either A's or B's theory in conjunction with the theory of either C or D, and finding that he is successful under the system of his adoption will always adhere to that method and will not believe in the possibility of any other being half as good. It is human nature to believe in what one has tested and found satisfactory and thenceforward to turn a deaf ear to any argument against it. How often does one who has embraced a creed reject that creed? Seldom. Almost as seldom is his ear open to anything that may be said in favour of any other creed.

Let us examine the bases on which the tenets of A, B, C, and D are built. A says: 'The reason why you should invariably walk down wind on snipe'—you cannot by a vastly long way invariably walk either down wind or up wind on snipe, but that does not matter—is this. Snipe generally rise against the

wind, however light that wind may be ; therefore if you walk down wind the bird will rise at you—or if not exactly at you, in such a direction that the first few beats of the wings will lessen the distance between the bird and yourself. Thus you have a longer time in which to take your shot. On the other hand, if you walk up wind, the bird, rising against the wind, will increase the distance between you and itself from the moment it leaves the ground.'

B says : 'The reason why, when walking after snipe, you should invariably walk up wind is this. It is quite true that snipe generally rise against the wind and therefore decrease the distance between the gun and themselves ; but then it is also true that, like other birds, they lie better if you approach them up wind than if you come down wind on them. By walking up wind, you may often get within shot of a snipe which would never allow you to do so if you were coming down wind. In the long run you will gain far more than you lose if you walk up wind. Take my advice and make walking up wind your regular proceeding—and don't believe a word the other fellow tells you.'

C explains : 'The reason why you should always shoot at a snipe the very first moment you feel that you are likely to kill the bird is this : Snipe shooting

is simply a knack, fairly easy to acquire if you only have practice enough. Fire at your birds immediately after a twist, and you will soon find that you can kill them without difficulty. Never allow yourself to get into the way of hesitating or waiting under any circumstances. If you wait till the birds have finished twisting you may wait time after time till they have passed beyond certain killing range; and you will miss them time after time for this reason and no other. Therefore, it is far better to acquire the knack of killing them in my way. Begin by making it a practice to sight your bird as soon as ever it rises, follow it as long as may be necessary, if it be necessary at all, and then fire the moment after a twist. In a comparatively short time you will feel instinctively when the bird may be killed, and you will soon prove for yourself that a twisting snipe is not such a very difficult thing to hit after all. When once you have mastered the knack, this system will yield you a considerably higher percentage of kills than that of hanging on to your birds.'

D asserts: 'The reason why you should never think of pulling the trigger till a snipe has settled down into straight flight is this: Until the bird has finished twisting there is no certainty whatever of killing it. If you fire at snipe before they have settled down

into straight flight and take them, or attempt to take them, immediately after a twist, as some people advise, you will miss your bird time after time for the simple reason that the bird makes another twist sooner than you anticipated. I do not deny that you can acquire the knack of killing a moderate percentage of twisting birds, but I deny absolutely that shooting at twisting birds pays as well as hanging on. Even if you sacrifice as much as ten or twelve yards in range, as you must very often do, you will stand a considerably better chance of killing your bird by waiting for straight flight than by pulling the trigger before it has finished twisting. Mine is the only rational system to adopt. Follow my advice, and do not listen to any nonsense you may hear from C.'

The region of controversy indeed ! If a writer believes in and advocates A's ideas, he has all B's followers down on him like a hundred of bricks, and is straightway voted a duffer ; the same fate is in store for him at the hands of A's followers if he believes in and advocates the dicta of B. The adherents of C will dub him an ignoramus if he supports D's doctrine, while D's disciples will call him the same thing, or perhaps something stronger, if he uphold the doctrine of C.

I know A, B, C, and D well. They all do good

work when shooting snipe. I partly agree with and partly differ from them all. As dogmatic writing cannot well be avoided, I will proceed to state my own views as dogmatically as A, B, C, and D have stated theirs.

A believes in walking down wind on snipe. So do I, emphatically, under certain conditions; under other conditions I consider it altogether a mistake, and I certainly do not believe in making a fad of it—going out of one's way to put it into effect, losing a lot of time, and covering a lot of extra ground.

In snipe shooting, more than in any other kind of shooting, one is at the mercy of the mood of the birds, the mood of the birds being largely dependent upon the weather and the phases of the moon, as we shall see later. It is he and he only who watches for himself the wide variations of the birds' mood, who studies the causes of these variations till more often than not he can tell before he starts in the morning what their current mood will be, who is free from all prejudice and has sufficient perception to fit himself into the circumstances of the hour; it is he and he only who will do the best that can be done among snipe. You may deal with snipe in one way on Monday; on Tuesday, if you wish to make as good a bag as possible, you may have to deal with them, as far as cir-

cumstances allow, in quite a different manner. To adhere from day to day to any hard and fast rules in snipe shooting, to put into continuous practice any fad about always doing one thing or always doing another thing, means simply to fall a long way behind the results that are to be achieved by keeping an open mind and acting according to the conditions that prevail at the time.

To return to A :—There are two conditions only under which A's advice should be followed, viz. when the birds are lying well, and when they are lying badly during the prevalence of a stiff wind. Under these conditions one should always walk down wind. As we were told by A, snipe generally—some people say always, but this is not correct—rise against the wind, and thus for a brief period decrease their distance from the gunner who walks down wind on them : therefore the man behind the gun has more time in which to take his shot and has also a better chance of being able to kill the bird at certain range after it has finished twisting. Thus it is, when possible, the wiser, I may say far the wiser plan, to walk down wind, unless the birds are wild. The reason why one should only walk down wind on wild snipe during a stiff wind is this : when such a wind is blowing the birds can hear your footsteps no more plainly

when you come at them down wind than when you come at them up wind, and as they are wild, the few feet or yards you may gain in range are a material advantage. When a snipe has been once flushed, whether it has been fired at or not, and marked down, it is always worth while taking the trouble to work round and come at it up wind. The bird remains on the *qui vive* for some little time after settling, and you stand a better chance of a shot if you walk up wind on it than if you come down wind.

B believes in walking up wind on snipe, and so do I, emphatically, under certain conditions ; but I no more believe in making it a standing practice than I believe in making a standing practice of walking down wind. There are two conditions under which, whenever possible, one should walk up wind on snipe. The first condition is : Whenever the birds are lying badly, unless there should be a stiff wind at the time. When only a light wind is blowing, a wild snipe feeding in some ditch or hollow is often up and away long before you approach within range if you are walking down wind, whereas if you come at it up wind the bird, failing to hear your footsteps, will not rise till you are near enough for a shot. Therefore, always when possible walk up wind on wild snipe unless there is a stiff wind. The second condition under which

you should always walk up wind if possible is when you are approaching a bird you have already flushed and marked down.

C believes in shooting at a snipe the very first moment you feel that you are likely to kill it. So do I, emphatically, under certain circumstances, but I do not by a very long way believe in making it a regular system. The only circumstances under which a shot should be put in at the earliest possible moment—in other words, when a snap shot should be taken—is when the bird rises at anything like lengthy range, or when there is near by some obstacle or another which may prevent a clear shot being had if you tarry. When a bird rises some distance away, it is indubitably the better policy not to pause a second: every yard is then of importance, and if you hesitate over the snap shot, the bird will very often never again give as favourable a chance to the gunner as it gave when the snap shot might have been taken—one may have to put up with both a longer range and a more difficult shot.

B believes in never pulling the trigger till a snipe has settled down into straight flight, and once more my comment is so do I, emphatically, save under the conditions instanced in the preceding paragraph; but I no more believe in making it a standing practice

than I believe in making a standing practice of following C's system. When a snipe rises near at hand or at a moderate distance it should never be fired at till there comes the chance of a steady shot, unless the bird should still be twisting when near the limit of certain killing range, and then I advocate the taking of a more or less uncertain shot rather than allowing the bird to increase the range.

Let me, dogmatically, also summarise these matters :--

1. Always when possible walk down wind on snipe when (*a*) the birds are lying well and when (*b*) they are lying badly during a stiff wind.

2. Always when possible walk up wind when (*a*) the birds are lying badly and there is not a stiff wind, and when (*b*) you are approaching a bird you have already flushed.

3. Always shoot as quickly as possible when a bird rises at some distance.

4. Always when a bird rises within moderate distance wait for straight flight till it approaches the limit of certain killing range, and should it be still twisting when near this limit, put in your shot at once rather than allow the range to be increased.

I would not have other than a liberal construction placed upon my use of the term 'certain killing

range.' A fair construction would be that range at which seven out of ten snipe ought to be killed clean if the gun were held right.

After anyone has said all he can say as to how, according to his own views, snipe should be walked after and how they should be shot, there still remains the fact that it is not very infrequently better to act impulsively, or instinctively, than to adhere to any set rule whatsoever.

A first-class snipe shot is born. If a man be a good snipe shot, he is invariably, I believe, a good shot among any other kind of game. On the opposite hand, a man may show first-class form when pulling down tall pheasants or driven partridges, and yet cut a very moderate figure when you see him at work on snipe. Though a first-class shot at all other kinds of game, a man not born with the natural aptitude may shoot snipe for half a lifetime and never be able to kill the birds well.

And what is it that lies at the bottom of the possession or otherwise of this natural aptitude? On my own part, I believe—the gunner having all the faculties that go to the making up of a good shot: perfect vision, ability to estimate speed, distance, and angle accurately and instantly, a steady hand and a steady head—that it may be summed up in the one

word steadiness ; supreme steadiness of nerve and judgment makes the first-class snipe shot ; the indifferent snipe shot is indifferent because he lacks it. While a certain degree of steadiness of nerve and judgment is requisite to first-class shooting of other kinds, excess of this degree is essential to first-class snipe shooting.

Whether this be so or not, absolute steadiness of nerve and judgment distinguishes the good snipe shot from the moderate or bad. How often may one witness the missing of snipe and feel assured—one can *see* it—that the shooter shot too hurriedly and too flurriedly, that, had he been steady, he ought to have killed his birds. He who shoots thus hurriedly and flurriedly at snipe is in nowise necessarily a bad or even a moderate shot : he may be able to stop his right and left of partridges as neatly as anyone. His hurried and flurried shooting would not appear the least hurried and flurried if we saw him shooting partridges instead of snipe ; we should only call him a good, quick shot. But snipe shooting and partridge shooting are two very different things. One cannot well shoot too quickly at partridges, one cannot well shoot too steadily at snipe.

There is something peculiarly nerve-thrilling about the way in which a snipe rises. Suddenly,

when one least expects it—one expects it continuously, of course, but it generally seems to happen when one's expectancy is flagging for the moment—there comes that quaint, sharp note of alarm, and the same instant one sees the little bird frolicking away on the wind, one wing up and the other down, and then the first wing down and the other one up, twisting now this way and then that, and travelling as very few, if any, other birds can travel when getting up steam. The suddenness of it all, the startlingness of it all, are fatal to whomsoever fails in steadiness of nerve and judgment: the gun springs to the shoulder, there is a hurried and flurried shot—and yet another bird goes to swell the huge, huge total of missed snipe.

Starting as the bird springs up—so natural that some people are never able to subdue it—and therefore having to take the shot with unsteadied nerves, is extremely difficult to overcome, and until it be overcome no one can hope to be more than a moderate snipe shot at the best. Watch a really good snipe shot at work. Not a muscle of his body is seen to move as a bird rises near by, for his nerves are under complete control. He makes calculations, conscious or unconscious; then his gun goes swiftly to his shoulder, and just at the right moment, that moment

of moments in all the bird's course, he pulls the trigger and the snipe falls dead.

To the one who fails to shine when snipe shooting, or to the one who is making his first acquaintance with this branch of sport, I would say : Hold yourself in. When that startling cry is heard and that blotch of brown dashes up before you, hold yourself in, and, however long it may take you to master the art, persist sedulously in holding yourself in might and main every time a snipe rises till you have so far mastered your impulses that not a nerve or a muscle responds to the lightning-like up-winging of the long-billed bird. While the snipe is twisting away on its wild career, hold yourself in still, and when, but not till then, you think its twisting must be nearly over, bring your gun quickly to your shoulder. Every time a bird rises near you tell yourself there is no need whatsoever for hurry and flurry. Few people seem to realise how short is the space of time required to bring the gun to the shoulder. It is a useful lesson, to any one who has the feeling that the gun must be jumped to the shoulder the moment a snipe rises, to hold his gun at the ready and then ask someone to take a watch and ejaculate 'One !' at the beginning of a second, and 'Two !' at its termination. At the word One,' let the experimenter, with all the quickness

at his command, bring the gun to his shoulder and sight some object : if the gun fits as it should fit, the sight will be on the object as the heel touches the shoulder. The shortness of the time in which he can do this will almost assuredly surprise him ; it will quite assuredly show him how needless is flurry when a snipe rises at a moderate distance. Hold yourself in !

Forward and high is a golden rule in all snipe shooting. To every one snipe—twisting barred—missed through excess of allowance there are hundreds missed through the gun not being held forward enough. If your average among snipe is not a good one, begin by giving one bird what you consider quite an absurd allowance, the next bird a slightly decreased allowance and so on ; and before you have fired more than a very few shots you will suddenly receive a lesson that will revolutionise your ideas on the subject of snipe shooting and very likely make you a good snipe shot from that day. In the same way begin by holding at what you consider an absurd elevation when firing at a straight-away snipe, and gradually decrease that elevation. A lesson, never to be forgotten, will come as suddenly and as forcibly in this case as in the other. Given a snipe that rises near you : now look at the bird when two

or three hundred yards away, and consider the gradient it must have climbed to reach such a height. A snipe is almost always rising when shot at, though the gunner may not think so.

But after all is said and done, the fact remains that killing snipe well is purely and simply a knack. One cannot teach another the knack ; one can only point out those things which are essential to its acquirement, or which have proved essential to its acquirement in one's own case. Out of twenty first-class all-round shots, I do not think more than fifteen can make themselves anything better than fair snipe shots ; four out of the remaining five can make themselves good snipe shots ; the twentieth only can become a brilliant snipe shot—not because he has more shooting or trains his faculties more assiduously than the others, but simply because he has, and the others have not, absolute steadiness of nerve and absolute steadiness of judgment. An open question, this, of course—I merely give my own opinion.

As I have already said, the mood in which we find snipe is largely dependent upon the weather and the moon. On moonlight nights the birds feed continuously. Hence when daylight comes they are more inclined for rest than movement, and generally lie well. Their flight is usually less twisting and less

rapid after a night's feeding by moonlight than after a night spent in darkness. On dark nights the birds are hampered in their search for food, if indeed they search for food at all. When daylight comes they begin to feed eagerly, and will continue to do so for some hours, and, being fully on the alert, are generally difficult to approach. When the day is heavy and dull snipe generally lie well. When the day is bright and fresh the birds generally lie badly.

Thus the conditions under which snipe generally lie best of all are when a dull, heavy day follows a moonlight night, while the conditions under which they generally lie worst are when a fresh, bright day succeeds a dark night. Frost is not taken into consideration here.

The weather affects the mood of snipe less than does the moon. We are more likely to find the birds lying well when a bright, fresh day follows a dark night than when a light night is followed by a heavy, dull day.

When frost gives in the morning after a hard night snipe generally lie well throughout the day. When frost continues during the day, that is, when there is frost enough to prevent the birds from feeding freely, snipe generally lie badly. When a rapid thaw follows prolonged frost, snipe are generally very wild. Snipe

are always wild when they collect into wisps. There is safety in many eyes.

These rules hold good in the large majority of cases. The snipe, however, is so uncertain a bird in every respect that one can never say for certain how he will act under any given conditions. Nine times running we may find snipe lying like stones on a heavy day following a light night, and the tenth time we may find them almost as wild as hawks; nine times running we may find the birds almost as wild as hawks when a bright day follows a pitch-dark night, and the tenth time we may find them lying like stones.

Whatever the conditions of moon and weather may be, the two hours after daybreak and the two hours before dark are nearly always the best for snipe shooting; often the birds will lie well during these four hours and be quite unapproachable the rest of the day. In snipe shooting one cannot be too early at work after it is light enough to sight a bird. Before the first two hours of daylight are over, very frequently indeed before the first hour, the large majority of the birds—unless the night should have been dark and frosty, in which case they will be still intent on seeking food—leave their feeding grounds and scatter themselves over the higher

country. From two hours to an hour before dark they begin to return to their feeding grounds. When people are heard to say, 'There are no snipe about at all,' or 'There are so few snipe about, they are not worth going after; you may tramp the whole day and not find three birds,' the keen snipe shot, he who considers that a little personal inconvenience adds zest to the sport rather than otherwise, can often laugh in his sleeve. He is out with his gun at dawn; and as soon as ever there is light enough to shoot, he swiftly visits all the favourite feeding spots of the birds, returning with half a dozen couple or so about the time other people are sitting down to breakfast. These other people start their day at nine-thirty or ten o'clock, and come home early in the afternoon vowing there is not a snipe in the whole country. Our keen and knowing friend at from three to four o'clock in the afternoon makes another rapid tour of the birds' favourite feeding spots, again meeting with just reward for his endeavours.



'THE KEEN SNIPE SHOT IS OUT WITH HIS GUN AT DAWN'



CHAPTER III

HAUNTS AND HABITS

SNIFE shooting *per se* is the same thing wherever we may find ourselves, whether we are shooting over mud in India, a morass in Morocco, a bog in Ireland, or a marsh in our own merrie England, for England is still merrie England to the sportsman, however dull and dispiriting she may appear to the life-long toilers of the city. What is not the same thing wherever we may be is the going.

As a general rule, the best snipe shooting implies the worst going, and when the going is really bad, he who would engage in this most entrancing of sport must be prepared to face much. The worst going and the best snipe shooting in the kingdom are the going and the shooting on an Irish bog. Bog-trotting may almost be described as a fine art, attainable to perfection only after long experience and practice. The practised eye tells well nigh instinctively where the

foot may be safely placed ; the practised foot starts back well nigh instinctively the instant its sense of touch tells that all is not right, and saves its owner before weight is thrown upon it. Yet even the most experienced of bog-trotters will make mistakes now and again, generally when his uttermost thought is upon the birds rising thick and fast before him. Nothing is more calculated to distract attention from matters personal than the proceedings of snipe when they engage in the very favourite pastime of springing up one after another a gunshot-and a half or a couple of gunshots away. The less experienced bog-trotter has most unpleasant experiences at times ; the novice not infrequently finds himself disastrously bogged. Indeed, I think if the sound waves of spoken words and the thought waves of thoughts unuttered were retained by the soil below, and might be extracted therefrom and registered in the form of gramophone records, many an Irish bog would yield quite as much unparliamentary language to the square yard as could be unearthed from any golf green in the United Kingdom. The spick and span sportsman who starts to traverse an Irish bog is often enough a fearful, wonderful, and unspeakable object by the time he has carried out his purpose. Only those as sound as a bell are fit for the work or should think of allowing

the fascinations of snipe shooting to tempt them to engage upon it. There are few if any more exacting forms of sport, nor is there any sport more attractive to the gunner when the birds are abundant and lying well.

Though the going one encounters when snipe shooting, otherwise than over the bogs, is comparatively good going, there is generally plenty of hard work attaching to it. In the first place, movement is continuous; not only has a great deal of close walking to be done in search of the birds, but there is the constant working back to pick up a bird which has risen wild, or been missed, and has pitched again within reasonable distance in some spot which makes it appear almost certain that a kill will result if we approach with caution. When shooting over ditch-drained country, it always pays well immediately to follow up every bird that has been marked down in a dyke within anything like fair distance, and up to any distance—the eye does not follow a snipe a great way—if one be quite sure of the dyke in which it went down. I have found small glasses of very great service while tramping over the marshes at times when the birds have been wild, and, by following up every bird which happened to pitch straight into a dyke, have made good days under the most unfavourable conditions.

One often feels surprised at the small acreage of land that has been covered when following up snipe in this manner, and at the same time one is always convinced that much better results have accrued than would have resulted if one had gone straight on and ignored birds which pitched to the rearward. The quantity of walking one does when snipe shooting on marsh or fen is very great ; probably, considering the pace, the distance one covers is often three times as long as the distance one covers in a day when walking after partridges.

And then there is the crossing of the dykes and ditches, for wherever we shoot snipe, on the marsh or fen, or in the river valley, we find obstacles of the kind which have to be left behind us. Plank bridges are generally few and far between ; if one never crossed save by a plank, only a small quantity of ground would be covered comparatively, while generally speaking, following up a marked bird would be so lengthy a proceeding as to be scarcely worth the necessary expenditure of time. Hence a great deal of jumping has to be done—and continuous jumping is apt to tell heavily before the end of the day. Jumping the wide dykes of the fens needs not a little practice—as well as a fair quantity of nerve—before one gets well into the work : and even then a



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HOW TO THROW A GUN

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faulty calculation may lead to a sousing. I have seen a companion land flat on his back—the further bank gave way as his feet touched it—in a dyke containing about two feet of water and a bottom of the blackest of black mud. On regaining firm land he presented a picture never to be forgotten: nor was the rage he was in ever to be forgotten either. Poor fellow! he was scouting during the late war and had four bullets put simultaneously through his head by ambushed Boers.

When shooting over country where the dykes are wide it should be made a practice for the gunner to hand his gun to his companion, then to jump the dyke, and then to catch the guns as they are thrown from the other side. A gun is best thrown by holding it about half way up the barrel with the left hand and placing the fingers of the right hand under the heel. It should be caught with one hand by the barrel, six or eight inches from the breech. Throwing and catching a gun, unloaded of course, constitute a most safe and simple operation. If you take anything but quite easy jumps with a gun in your hand, sooner or later either you will be certain to suffer at the expense of saving your gun, or your gun will suffer at the expense of saving yourself. I have known a man carrying a jumping pole as a regular

adjunct to the snipe-shooter's equipment. With the aid of a pole, jumping of course becomes comparatively easy, and far less telling.

Anything in the way of a cartridge-bag or a game-bag is an abomination when snipe shooting, unless one should be merely pottering round. On bad ground, a bag, its pull shifted by a sudden jerk, will upset one's balance sooner than anything, and is always more or less an encumbrance ; when jumping has to be done, it is worse than an abomination. If you study comfort and utility, don a shooting coat of the good old shape with game pockets in the good old place. Wear a long cartridge waistcoat, or—it has drawbacks which a waistcoat has not—a cartridge belt, and stow away in odd pockets what extra cartridges you think will be needed. Short cartridges are a convenience if your gun will shoot with them quite as well as with long ones. If otherwise, they are undesirable, decreased bulk in no way compensating for a poor pattern.

Wherever in England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales there exist conditions suited to the bird's tastes, there from time to time will snipe appear in greater or less numbers. These conditions, as we have seen in an earlier chapter, are : soft soil containing an abundant supply of worms, and water near

at hand wherein the birds may frequently cleanse their bills from the drying mud or earth with which they quickly become incrustcd. What care the snipe takes of that long bill of his ! how scrupulously clean he keeps it !

The question of dogs in connection with snipe-shooting is an important one.

A dog which retrieves really well both from land and water is to be considered indispensable to the gunner who walks after snipe. Failing the companionship of such a dog, one must labour under considerable and continuous difficulties, and lose many and many a bird in spite of all endeavours. Not only do snipe repeatedly fall in the most inaccessible places, but, on account of their small size and the tints of their plumage, it is often a difficult task or an impossible one to find them if they fall on anything save quite bare ground. If a bird falls in watery sedge or rush, it is almost certainly lost for good and all unless one has the services of a retriever at command. More than ever is a dog indispensable when soft snow lies upon the ground, especially snow that is thawing and sinking away from the upstanding herbage. A snipe falling into soft snow is often completely lost to sight, not a sign disclosing the spot where it fell : and unless it has been marked down with

absolute exactitude, it is more than likely never to be gathered without canine assistance.

Writing on snipe-shooting without a dog, there occurs to me one of the strangest shooting incidents of which I have ever heard, an incident having the merit of being strictly true. The time of its happening was many years ago ; the actors were near relatives of my own. A and his son B, minus a dog, were returning home after an afternoon ramble with the gun. While walking along the bank of a tidal part of the Norfolk Ouse, four or five miles above Lynn, B shot a snipe which fell, apparently dead, on the river mud, nearly knee deep at that particular point. The bird not being considered worth the inconvenience which retrieving it from its muddy resting place would have entailed, A and B continued their homeward way without it. Between the spot where the bird was left on the mud and the house in which A and B lived at the time, there lies about a third of a mile of park. When A and B had crossed the park and reached their house, they found A's wife and daughter standing on the drive examining a dead snipe. A few minutes before, they, A's wife and daughter, had heard a fluttering among the branches of a weeping birch which overhung the drive, and a moment afterwards a wounded snipe fell at their feet. The bird,

which died as soon as it was taken from the ground, had its breast and the under part of its wings coated with mud, unmistakably mud from the river. The question was, could this possibly be the bird that had been left for dead on the river mud? B immediately returned to the spot where the supposed dead bird had been left—and found it gone. The snipe which fluttered down through the branches of the weeping birch was, beyond doubt, the same bird that had been left for dead; it had risen again and overtaken A and B, and had reached the house before they reached it, falling not a dozen yards from the front door.

Many, if not most, Irish sportsmen make a practice of shooting snipe over dogs. When one is shooting bog or undrained marsh, a setter is invaluable, especially when one finds the birds none too abundant—and he who owns a dog which will quarter freely, stand steadily and retrieve the birds when shot, is well equipped indeed. In the case of ordinary snipe shooting in England, however, when one simply walks the drained marsh, a setter is worse than useless. Your spaniel or retriever will, or should, tell you of any very close-lying bird in a dyke which may be inclined to squat while you pass it. It may be said that if you train a setter to retrieve snipe, the

dog becomes quite demoralised—and will demoralise any other dog—for work in the turnip field : it is a difficult thing to cure a dog that has once been taught to mouth dead as part of his duty.

Whatever may be the circumstances under which we are shooting snipe, the moment it is seen that a charge has told on a bird the gun should be reloaded as quickly as if other birds were already on the wing. Unless this rule is observed, unless one accustoms one's self to reloading instantly, many a snipe will be lost which otherwise would go to swell the bag. Repeatedly it happens that a second bird, or perhaps a couple of birds, will rise a few moments after the first has been brought down, and if the gunner be caught leisurely loading his gun, the other birds stand a most excellent chance of being able to put themselves nicely out of range before the gun can be brought to bear. I think snipe more often rise a few seconds after a shot than at the shot. No doubt sudden fear prompts many of them to squat the instant the sound of the discharge reaches them and keeps them squatting till they realise that what they took to mean near and overwhelming peril, the report, has passed—and then, having been put fully on the *qui vive*, they cognise the gunner's proximity and make as speedy a dash for safety as they can. Very

frequently one may kill a bird that rose at, say, thirty yards, this bird having seen or heard one's approach, and then have another, which had not seen or heard one's approach, spring up only fifteen or twenty yards away after one has had time to replenish the emptied chamber.

I have already briefly alluded to the partiality shown by snipe to certain favourite spots. In any piece of snipe ground there are always certain spots where we may confidently rely on finding snipe if there are any birds in the district. One of these favourite spots may be a little rushy pool, another a certain part of a certain dyke, another a particular corner of a stretch of swamp—yet why these favourite spots, snipe corners they are often called, should be preferred to other apparently similar spots, none of us can say. One cannot tell by any comparison one may make why the one little rushy pool should possess greater attractions than the dozen other little rushy pools within a quarter of a mile radius, or why the certain part of the certain dyke should be chosen before any other part of the same dyke, or why the particular corner of the stretch of swamp should be esteemed more desirable than the other corners : from the human point of view, all the little rushy pools are the same, all the parts of the dyke are the same, and

all the corners of the stretch of swamp are the same. Yet the snipe discerns very considerable difference between his favourite spots and the spots for which he has no liking.

The food question lies at the bottom of all this, no doubt. One may hear it said that the snipe's fixed liking for favourite spots is due to the greater shelter afforded by these spots, greater, that is, than the shelter yielded by apparently similar spots near at hand. But for my own part I have never been able to find that considerations of shelter have anything to do with the matter. Snipe will be found in just the same favourite part of a favourite dyke whether the wind blows directly down the dyke or whether the banks serve as shelter. Many favourite spots are open to all the winds that blow.

Beyond the question of why snipe always choose to establish themselves in these favourite spots on the snipe ground, we have the question as to how they find them. To this latter question no satisfactory answer can be given. We can only say that the birds possess some unfathomable instinct which declares to them that the favourite little pool, the certain part of the certain dyke, and the particular corner of the stretch of swamp will yield more or better food than the other pools, the other parts of

the dyke, and the other corners of the swamp. No one, I believe, has ever attempted an explanation of the instinct; to myself it appears altogether inexplicable. It may be reasoned that half a dozen snipe alighting on a strip of marsh would quickly and thoroughly explore it throughout, and would soon discover those favourite spots which, presumably on account of their yielding a better supply of food than other apparently similar spots on the marsh, are occupied by snipe after snipe. But the birds drop into the favourite spots unerringly, without any wandering or exploring. One sees them do it again and again: one knows they do it again and again when not seen. One may put up a bird on a stretch of marsh containing twenty dykes, three of which have parts that are favourite spots, and it is more than an even chance that the bird, after remaining on the wing for a few minutes, will pitch in one of these three dykes. Again, frost sets in, and one takes one's gun towards dusk and looks round this same piece of marsh, which has not yet been visited by snipe since the season began, without finding a bird. As soon as ever it is light enough to shoot the following morning, one visits the three favourite spots and kills a snipe from each of them, and then one walks all the rest of the marsh and does not find

another bird. The night before happens to have been pitch dark. Those three birds one killed did not find those three favourite spots by exploring the marsh. On the other hand, they were guided by an instinct about which we know nothing; they came into the marsh while there was still a little light left and pitched unhesitatingly into the favourite spots, just as countless numbers of snipe have pitched unhesitatingly into the same spots before them.

What explanation can there be except instinct? Further, it may be reasoned that these three birds, having explored the piece of marsh on a previous occasion, were familiar with the three favourite spots, and, being driven from some other feeding ground by the sudden frost, came straight to spots which they knew as the best feeding spots on this piece of marsh. Possibly this was the case; but when we again walk round with the gun a little before dark we find three more birds in these same three spots; and the next morning three more birds in the same three spots, and so on, and very likely all the while we do not flush another bird anywhere else on the whole piece of marsh. At this rate we must very quickly come to an end of the birds to whom these three favourite spots could possibly be familiar; and when we find fresh birds continually inhabiting these spots directly

others have been killed we must allow it to be more probable that our three original birds dropped into those three favourite spots by pure instinct, like the later birds, than that they knew the advantages of the spots through previous experience.

One may know half a dozen favourite spots on a piece of snipe land, and may kill a snipe at each spot day after day for week after week. I have done so myself, and I have repeatedly killed three snipe a day from a favourite spot at times when the birds have been far from abundant. If snipe are fairly numerous all the favourite spots find fresh tenants very quickly after one lot of their predecessors has been killed. Jack follow one another in favourite spots just as full snipe follow one another. It seems to be a point of honour among snipe not to intrude upon the bird in possession, for a favourite spot is generally occupied by only a single bird. As soon as that bird has fulfilled his destiny by finding his way into the sportsman's bag or pocket, the first comer feels free to take the vacant place.

I wonder whether others besides myself have noticed how often a favourite snipe spot is also the haunt of a wren, or whether my own experience of knowing various snipe corners in which wrens are always to be found is an uncommon one?

With this peculiarity of the bird—its strong partiality for certain spots—in his mind the snipe shooter should, whenever it is practicable, visit all favourite spots as early in the day as possible, afterwards working the rest of the ground systematically. This for two reasons. First, so uncertain are snipe in their movements that whereas every favourite spot might have held a bird—perhaps the only birds on the shoot—at nine o'clock in the morning, an hour later every snipe may have left the district ; secondly, the earlier the spots are visited for the first time, the better is the chance of your finding that other birds from other land have dropped into them when you visit them again. It is perhaps needless to say that all favourite spots should command attention as frequently as possible during the day's shooting.

That brief period of twilight at the close of the day is all too often neglected by those who take gun in hand to pursue the long-billed bird. My advice in this matter is as follows :—

Let your movements as the day wanes be so timed that just before the light begins to fail rapidly you find yourself at some selected point in what you consider the most snipe-patronised part of the ground. Unless you can stand in a fairly deep ditch—the best possible situation—there must be a blind of some

sort, something large enough to blur the sharp outline of your figure. Failing a natural blind, a single hurdle, propped up on end, acts effectively ; failing any blind at all, peg a piece of pure white paper, some four inches square, to the ground about twenty yards from where you propose to stand. If you rest motionless as a log, most of the snipe that come over in the dusk will fail to notice you till you jump the gun to your shoulder, their attention being absorbed by the paper.

I may say, in the words of Alice's White Knight, that this paper arrangement is 'a plan of my own invention,' though I have little doubt that others have invented it independently. As a wildfowler, I have found it invaluable in various connections. When shooting from a mud-hole, or pit, by the fringe of the tide, that little piece of white paper pegged down near the gunner means a considerable increase in his prospects of making a bag. Nearly every bird that passes has its attention drawn by the small white object, and fails to notice the pit and its occupant till well within range. For the curlew the paper possesses actual attraction : I have had a curlew, that wildest and most wary of birds, turn sharp out of its course half a dozen gun-shots away, and, intent on fathoming the mystery of a new, strange object, come so

near to my pit that I could have touched it with a hop-pole.

Shooting snipe at flight time is exciting sport, and needs the highest mental concentration on the part of the sportsman. The slightest hesitation in taking a shot is fatal, for the light is uncertain and the bird's speed enormous. When fortunate enough to have the chance of putting a charge into the face of a bird, act upon your good fortune like lightning : for some reason or another which I do not profess to explain, this is the most certain of all shots in bad light. Remember, for broadside shots you must hold yards ahead, for straight-away shots, if any height at all, you cannot very well hold too far below. Of course, plenty of practice is essential to the slaughter of fighting snipe ; the young gunner cannot hope to do much good at first. The slightest inclination to hesitation must be thoroughly overcome. Before the flight time is over the light has often grown so dim that one has time for no more than to throw the gun to the shoulder and fire where one knows the snipe to be, the bird having passed from sight before the trigger can be pulled. If you are without a dog, you will lose many of the birds you kill. Let your dog range after every shot, unless you are absolutely certain that the bird was not touched, and when you have

shot into a wisp, send him a second or a third time to make quite sure that nothing has been overlooked. It is not a very uncommon thing to drop two or three snipe out of a close wisp of half a dozen birds. Snipe are often inclined to string in a small wisp when the light is very dim, thus giving more or less a line shot when going straight away or coming at the gun. There is always one spot on a piece of snipe ground which is much more favourable to the gunner than any other spot. It should be sought for till found. The element of uncertainty attaches to all kinds of flight shooting. One night must be taken with another ; blanks must be looked upon as part of the regular order of things. The stroke of brilliant luck comes surely in the end. After a tiring day, when the birds have been so wild that scarcely anything could be done with them, a bag of two couple may become a total bag of nine or ten couple almost before one knows what is happening.

And I think this is all it is necessary to say on the subject of the practical side of snipe shooting.

At all times snipe shooting is uncertain work. Its great uncertainties are : whether or no there will be birds in the district when the gunner goes to look for them ; whether or no if there are birds in the district more than an odd one or two will be found in

that part of the district over which he may shoot ; whether or no if there are plenty of birds in his part of the district in the morning, they will take themselves off to some other part of the district at half an hour's notice ; whether, if they are found in abundance all day, they will lie well or whether they will prove so wild as to be scarcely approachable, if approachable at all ; and whether, if they are abundant and lie well, the gunner will be able to hit them, or whether he will find himself quite off form.

One goes off form more often and more thoroughly in snipe shooting than in any other kind of shooting whatsoever—I am convinced that this is the experience of nineteen snipe shooters out of every twenty. A bad start almost inevitably means bad form throughout the day : confidence lost after firing the first few shots cannot be picked up again till the following morning—if it can then. Colonel Hawker, that tough old sportsman of a past generation, tells us in his 'Diary' that on one occasion he killed thirteen snipe in succession, and then missed the following eleven. Experiences of the kind are far from rare ; a man who can stop eight birds out of twelve when in his best form may at other times scarcely be able to touch a feather. Colonel Hawker also tells us that he killed the first thirteen jack at which he shot in the year

1802, and then goes on to say :—‘I have since fired eight shots at one jack, and missed them all.’ An experience of this kind is also far from rare, and may be quite apart from the question of form ; not only does the tiny bird often escape the charge, when the gun is held true, in a manner little short of miraculous, but it is very frequently missed through excess of allowance. If after killing a few full snipe in quick succession a jack rises, one is extremely apt to miscalculate the slower speed of the jack and to hold too far ahead.

On the subject of jack snipe, the following seems worth repetition. The story is told of a certain Quartermaster Molloy, of the 64th Regiment.

While he was quartered at Geneva Barracks, Ireland, he became passionately enamoured of snipe shooting. After his duty was over, or if he could obtain special leave for a day, he regularly equipped himself for sporting ; and he had always the good luck to spring his jack snipe, at which he fired. He followed up immediately, and the bird dropped so close to him, often, that he was firmly persuaded he had killed it. He used to run, with breathless eagerness, to lay hold of his prize ; when, lo ! it would again rise and fly a little farther. One day, he fired *eighteen* times at it, and each time thought he had killed it. It served him for a whole season. At length he was one day crossing the bog in which it lay, when up it rose, and he exclaimed, ‘There’s my old friend !’ threw a stick at it, and killed it on the spot. When-

ever any of his brother officers found a jack snipe, they were always sure to say, 'There goes Quartermaster Molloy.'¹

Snipe shooting should be made illegal throughout the British Islands till October 1. The birds are seldom really fit to shoot before that time, besides lacking a great deal of the dash that distinguishes them afterwards. October 1 is now the opening day for snipe shooting in several Irish counties. Would that all our County Councils might follow suit—and, while they were about it, would that they might make September 15 the opening day for duck of all kinds, and March 15, or even March 21, the closing day for duck on the coast. Such a change in duck shooting dates would give the flappers a chance at the beginning of the season, and, at the close of the season, would give the wildfowler the opportunity for which he so often sighs in these days of topsy-turvey winters.

It has been said that, after India, the Outer Hebrides in a good season afford the finest snipe shooting in the world. In Ireland, the best snipe districts are Counties Galway, Mayo, Kerry, Cork, and Clare; in England, the best snipe counties are Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex, Lincolnshire, and Cam-

¹ Blakey's *Shooting*.

bridgeshire. There was a time when large English districts could show snipe shooting as good as any to be had in the sister Isle. Drainage and cultivation, however, have now forced England into a very inferior position in this respect. Yet, in a few favoured localities in our Eastern counties, some of the finest snipe shooting attainable is still to be had when the season happens to be right. One such locality known to me, only a few hundred acres in extent, holds snipe by the thousand in a good year, and is but rarely shot over. I knew as an old man one who, in his young days, made his winter's living by shooting over the undrained marshes of a Norfolk river valley. On one occasion—I received satisfactory corroboration of this from an independent source—he bagged a hundred couple of snipe in the day, shooting from dawn to dusk. At that time it was not such a very uncommon thing for a good shot to kill his fifty couple in the day on this particular tract of marsh.

I believe I am right in saying that the largest bag of snipe ever made in the British Islands—or ever recorded as having been made—by one gun in a single season is the bag secured by Mr. P. Halloran in County Clare during the long winter of 1880-81. Mr. Halloran's total for the season amounted to no

less than 1,376 head. In County Sligo Mr. Edward Gethin killed 959 birds during the season of 1877-78 Mr. Lloyd, a well-known writer on sport and natural history in his own day, tells us that, also in Ireland, he killed in 1820 1,310 snipe. Mr. Mottram, shooting in 1884 in one of the islands of the Hebrides, killed 992 snipe by the end of October. Snipe have never been so abundant in the British Islands as they were in 1880-81, when many districts teemed with the birds. During this year one game dealer in Ireland purchased and despatched to the different markets nearly 17,000 snipe. Of this total—these figures are beyond all questioning—over 9,000 were brought in by the peasants in the neighbourhood of Tralee, County Kerry. In England we cannot now in any way approach such figures, though very large seasons' bags were made on undrained land years ago, when snipe literally swarmed in the Norfolk and Cambridgeshire fens. Still, of later years some noteworthy bags have been made. Not such a very great while ago, in a locality over which I have myself done a good deal of snipe shooting, Mr. R. Fellowes accounted for 158 birds in a day. In one day, in 1860, Lord Leicester, at Holkham, got 156 snipe to his own gun.

Probably the very hottest snipe corner in all

England is a tract of boggy land about fifty acres in extent on Oulton Broad, near Lowestoft. It is known as Whitecast. Ever since snipe shooting was, these fifty acres or so have been incessantly and remorselessly shot over by succeeding generations of gunners, the attraction of the spot for the birds having always remained undiminished. Naturally the quantity of lead put into the ground has been very considerable. For long it had come to be said that, so great must be the number of pellets in the soil, a square foot of solid earth taken from any part ought to contain an ounce of shot. Then a bet was made that three square feet of earth a spit deep dug up and washed would yield three ounces of shot—and the bet was won. Colonel Leathes, in a letter to Sir Ralph Payne-Gallwey, vouches for the fact. One has thought at times that an old-established rabbit bank might contain even more lead per square foot.

Though a season's total like Mr. Halloran's 1,376 head sounds enormous to the ordinary every-day snipe shooter, it is probably almost a modest performance compared with what must have been done in India during a season by keen sportsmen: there it is certain that hard shooting would soon top such a total. A good shot on good snipe ground in India can kill his hundred couple or more in the day. Unfortunately

I can find no authentic record of a season's bag to a single gun in India. There are various weirdly tall Indian snipe shooting stories which, like a good many snake and tiger stories, lack what would be called strict corroboration, but, after making all due allowances for climate, one fully recognises that snipe shooting in a good corner of India is one of those things which must be seen to be rightly appreciated.

NATURAL HISTORY OF THE WOODCOCK

BY

L. H. DE VISME SHAW

CHAPTER I

THE WOODCOCK AND HIS WAYS

PERHAPS the woodcock (*Scolopax rusticola*) stands among British birds as the finest example of nature's many wonderful instances of protective colouring. How thoroughly Nature studies the hues of those of her creatures whose habits or disabilities of movement would make them almost certain victims to the hunger of predaceous foes ! In the insect world we find protective colouring the rule in all three stages of life, the colouring being dependent upon the surroundings into which the habits of the insect take it. To birds which by instinct squat instead of fleeing at the sight of an enemy, nature has been equally beneficent. The partridge, to all intents and purposes invisible to a hawk flying overhead, is a typical instance.

Those rich, beautiful mottlings of the woodcock, so strikingly noticeable when we take the bird into our hands and examine it closely, render the plumage

all but indiscernible against the bird's natural background of dead and dying leaves when viewed from a distance of but a very few feet, and it is in his daytime lair alone that the 'cock needs the protection of colour. The one conspicuous thing—and a very conspicuous thing it is—about a squatting woodcock is that large, liquid, lustrous eye, the eye of a bird of the night, which looks like a big black bead shining from the bed of leaves. The woodcock's eye—it is which frequently betrays the bird's presence to a human being. Did Nature but prompt the 'cock to close or almost close its eyes on the approach of an enemy, it would be well nigh as lost to sight among the dead foliage as a lappet moth.

The woodcock varies considerably in the tints of its plumage and very considerably in size and weight. Perhaps no other bird shows greater variation in size when in a wild state. On account of this diversity in size and colouring it was for long believed by sportsmen and naturalists that there were three and even four distinct kinds of 'cock. As late as our own time the belief that there are separate species of the birds lingers in some parts of the country. I suppose it may be taken that such a belief was quite a natural one in olden days by those who ever thought upon the subject, for people then were wont to believe almost anything

concerning natural history, however improbable it might really be. The common 'cock, the large muffed 'cock, and the little black or dark 'cock were usually declared to be distinct species by those who put pen to paper concerning *Rusticola*, while the white or buff bird was not infrequently given as a fourth. Besides the difference in the shade of the plumage of individual birds—pale, normal, and dark—pure sports in feathering have been recorded from time to time. One, for instance, is described as having the body a light ash tint with bars of delicate rufous hue, the tail brown, and the legs flesh colour ; another as having the head of a pale red, the body white, and the wings brown ; a third as being practically black throughout. Buff, cream-coloured and pure white woodcock have often been shot. The finest known specimen of the pure white bird is that preserved at Melton Constable in Norfolk, the seat of Lord Hastings. The bird was killed on the estate.

The average weight of the woodcock works out at something between eleven and twelve ounces. A very small bird will weigh as little as eight ounces or but a trifle over, a very fine one as much as fifteen or sixteen ounces. Occasionally one hears of the death of a phenomenal specimen which has turned the scale

at an ounce or two over the pound. Yarrel mentions a gigantic woodcock, shot in the year 1801, weighing no less than twenty-seven ounces. Another of twenty-four ounces was killed soon afterwards. Evidence as to the accuracy of the recorded weight of these birds is little to be doubted, if indeed it is not quite conclusive.

I have always when thinking of 'cock found myself compelled to believe that up till a century or so ago there existed in small numbers a distinct species of large woodcock of which the birds mentioned in the preceding paragraph were members. Such a species, numerically small and less well-equipped than the common 'cock for fighting the battle of life, might have been totally exterminated by a single winter of exceptional severity setting in with exceptional abruptness. From what one can glean, these very large birds were at one time so far common, especially in the eastern counties, as to be generally known by the rustics as 'double woodcock.' Their other name, muffled 'cock or muff-'cock, seems to imply some peculiarity in the growth of the feathers—perhaps something bearing a resemblance to that of the ruff. We never come across birds of anything like the size, or birds having any such peculiarity of plumage, as might lead us to say that we had killed a muffled 'cock in

our own day, nor has any bird of the kind been heard of for many decades. Though a great deal of what was written on nature subjects a hundred or more years ago has to be taken with more or less caution, we cannot doubt the quondam existence of the double woodcock. The only question of doubt is whether the bird was an enlarged variety of the common woodcock or whether it was a distinct species which passed out of existence something like a century ago. The latter seems to me very much more probable than the former. It is difficult to imagine a bird, the very largest examples of which encountered by us at the present time are only an ounce or two over the pound, ever throwing off specimens—specimens up to twenty-seven ounces—of such size and with such frequency. If the woodcock only so short a time back sported thus freely, it would sport as freely now. Such things in a wild creature do not change in a hundred years, if they do in a thousand. Yet neither we nor our fathers have ever seen or shot a double woodcock. Picture two wild birds of the same species lying side by side, the one weighing twenty-seven ounces and the other eight ounces. Then there is the peculiarity, for I think we must assume the peculiarity, of plumage which gave rise to the name

of muff, muffed, or muffled 'cock. It is a pity of pities that no double woodcock should ever have been preserved and handed down for our examination.

There are—in spite of a great deal that has from time to time been said to the contrary—no external signs whatever which will disclose the sex of a woodcock, and to the best of my knowledge there has never been made an examination of a number of 'cock such as would satisfactorily decide the question as to whether or not all the small birds we shoot are cocks and all the large ones hens. It is generally assumed, and, I think, correctly, that the females are to be known by their larger size. The sportsman thinks too much of the merits of his bag and the feelings of his cook to countenance the mutilation of a batch of birds necessary to prove this. If Lord Ardilaun, or some other highly-favoured sportsman, would consent to set aside twenty of the largest birds and twenty of the smallest at the end of a woodcock shoot, and have them examined and reported upon by some properly qualified person, the question would be finally set at rest—and I should be surprised to hear that a single hen was found among the small birds or a single cock among the large ones. As a rule, the plumage of a large 'cock is lighter in shade than that of a small one.

The woodcock nests in various parts of the British Islands, favouring certain districts and avoiding others entirely. In Ireland and the southern counties of England the bird nests more numerous than elsewhere. For the last two decades or so the 'cock has bred with us in steadily increasing numbers. There is little, if any, doubt that this increase is to be attributed to the comparative mildness of the seasons as a whole during that period. The nesting of the woodcock in England seems to have been a rare thing in the time of our grandfathers ; indeed, one feels compelled to fancy that many of the dead and gone generations of sportsmen never credited the 'cock with breeding here at all.

The pairing of woodcock begins on the average during the third week of February, sometimes a little earlier, sometimes a little later, according to the weather which prevails at the time. Birds have been known at times to nest as early as the middle of March, but such instances of early nesting have, I believe, only been noticed in very mild springs. As to whether or no the bird has the habit of nesting twice in the season there is no really conclusive evidence. Young woodcock have been found in the down as late in the year as August ; but in such cases it is likely enough that the first clutch was destroyed,

and that the parents nested a second time on that account.

During the period of courtship, and while the female bird is sitting, the male woodcock displays daytime activity which is never evinced at any other period of the year. When courting the lady of his choice, he is fond of strutting about with drooped wings and spread tail, and with the feathers of head and neck puffed out to their uttermost. As soon as his mate begins to sit, he will spend the first hour or so of daylight in flitting up and down the ride or open space near which the nest is situated, uttering meantime a cry which may be likened to 'whe-e-esp,' and at intervals giving voice to a second cry resembling the monosyllables 'bree, bree.' While this lasts, he looks, with the puffed-out feathers of neck and head, for all the world like some strange, long-beaked owl. The morning serenade over, he indulges in a lengthy rest, after which, towards the close of the afternoon, he again rises on the wing and goes through the same performance. When resting during the day, he selects a position never more than a few feet away from the nest.

The nest of the woodcock is of the most unpretentious kind, being nothing more than a rough collection of dead leaves and grass drawn together

into some convenient, natural depression in the ground. A situation with some kind of overhead shelter is usually chosen. A patch of bracken is the favourite situation; next to bracken, stunted gorse seems to possess the greatest attractions for nesting 'cock. The woodcocks' eggs are generally three in number; sometimes four are laid, but this number is never, or has never been known to be, exceeded. Their ground colour is buff, often inclining to brown or green; they are blotched at the larger end with grey and different shades of rusty brown. In length the woodcock's egg approximates an inch and three-quarters, under this measurement rather than over. The period of incubation cannot be stated with certainty, but it is somewhere about twenty-one days.

The woodcock's nest and eggs are barely distinguishable against the ground selected for them, the situation always giving one the impression that the owners have lent the fullest consideration to this matter; they seem to study everything in order to render their small establishment as little visible as may be. And well they succeed. The hen bird clings very closely to her eggs, sometimes allowing herself almost to be trodden on before making up her mind to leave them. I am able to vouch for the authenticity of a case in which a woodcock nesting in Norfolk, a

few years ago, allowed herself to be caught by the hand while sitting. Both the male and the female will endeavour to lure an intruder from the vicinity of the nest or young by feigning disablement.

Young woodcock are forward in development when hatched, and are able to leave the nest almost as soon as they are out of the shell.

In open weather the food of the woodcock consists almost entirely of worms, other diet probably not constituting more than two or three per cent. of the total of food consumed. When frost prevails and the surface of the usual feeding grounds is rendered impenetrable by the bird's bill, the deficiency in the worm supply is compensated for by the consumption of any insect food that may be found, fresh-water mollusca being perhaps the most eagerly sought for diet at such a time. If any food at all can be found in a woodcock during a period of privation, it is almost sure to be a small mollusc. The bird also consumes vegetable matter, though only in very small quantities, and never, I believe, as long as worms are to be found in unlimited numbers.

The feeding grounds of the woodcock are the same as those of the snipe as long as the weather is open, but when frost seals the surface of the feeding ground the former bird—though never the latter—explores the

lowest and most frost-sheltered recesses of the wood in search of its sustenance. The woodcock, except when pressed for food, will never feed on land at any distance from water. When the bird is probing for worms frequent washing of the bill is necessary, for the same reason that it is necessary to the snipe. Water it must have near at hand, even though that water be nothing more than a puddle.

The woodcock is nocturnal in its habits. During the hours of daylight it rests in some dry and sheltered spot in the covert or coppice, and at dusk sets forth on its journey to the feeding ground. This ground may be, and very often is, a long distance from the spot in which the bird chooses to rest while the sun is above the horizon. Some of the favourite 'cock coverts on the chalk and sand are miles from the nearest ground on which a woodcock would be at all likely to feed.

In the eastern counties it is often believed that the woodcock invariably walks from its daytime lair to its feeding ground. Considering how well the habits of the 'cock were known by past generations, and how effectively the knowledge of their habits was drawn upon to supply the larders of the day—by netting and snaring the birds—it is difficult to imagine in what way such a notion could have crept into existence. I

find among my notes an extract from an article, by a writer of considerable local repute, which appeared in an East Anglian paper a few years ago :—‘The woodcock always walks down to its feeding places if possible, even although they be, as they often are, a long way from the spot it haunts in the daytime.’ This exactly expresses the popular notion. But the idea is wholly erroneous, not to say grotesque ; decidedly grotesque if we imagine a woodcock walking through a quarter of a mile of undergrowth, crossing the road by the side of the covert, negotiating four or five fields of arable, and then striding over the mile of down he has to traverse before he can reach his favourite little piece of marsh. Instead of walking, the woodcock unfailingly takes wing on leaving its lair for the nightly expedition to the feeding place. Rising silently, it flits down some glade or ride in the covert, its elevation being never more than a few feet from the ground. On reaching the open, it suddenly rises to a considerable height, and continues at this height till it finds itself over the feeding ground, when it drops almost like a stone. In every wood or covert frequented by cock there is always a certain opening, generally the end of a ride, by which the birds leave and re-enter their home. I have no explanation of this peculiarity of habit. It seems the

more curious when we consider that 'cock do not leave the covert together but always singly, one after another. Between the time of the exit of the first bird on the wing and that of the last there is never an interval of more than a quarter of an hour or twenty minutes. As our forefathers set their 'cock-shut nets at these openings and waited for the flight of the 'cock, so do certain moderns who shoot for the pot, or the pocket, take up their stand at the same dusky hour. After ascertaining which opening in the wood is used by woodcock, one may, if anything of a flight shot, account for nearly every bird.

With the coming of dawn, the woodcock again takes wing, wheeling about for a short time, and often giving a peculiar call. Then, after once more rising to a considerable height, it starts with rapid flight in a bee-line for the covert in which it rests during the day. Except during the mating and nesting season the voice of the 'cock is rarely heard save when the bird is having its brief frolic at dawn or when it is well on the wing and flying towards its feeding ground at dusk. On again reaching the covert the bird descends with a sharp swoop by the side of the wood, which it enters by flying up the glade or ride down which it came the previous night. Once having

reached its favourite resting place, there it remains till dusk again begins to fall.

Such is the life of the woodcock while the weather remains open or while there are nothing beyond slight frosts. When hard frost comes, the usual unlimited supply of worms being then cut off, the bird is driven to seek a far more scanty livelihood by feeding on any insects that may be found above the surface of the ground; and to gain even this fare is compelled to forsake the open land whereon it has been accustomed to feed, and seek sustenance in spots where surface food is attainable. At such a time the bird explores any sheltered ditch or hollow, and turns over the decaying leaves and rubbish, devouring all insects that may be exposed during the operation. That the living the 'cock picks up in this way is quite insufficient for its enormous assimilative requirements may be told by its rapid loss of flesh under the circumstances. If severe frost and snow last more than a short time, 'cock quickly take their way to the coast, whence, the food of the shore birds being unsuited to their tastes, they soon make a dash for more southern lands unless the frost breaks up. A certain proportion of woodcock will sometimes, perhaps always, face starvation and death rather than join in the general movement to the shore and rush

from frost-bound Britain. Let it be said that the foregoing is more or less dogmatic. We never *see*, or very, very rarely see, the movements of woodcock at any time, for the simple reason that these movements are made after daylight. There are only deductions to guide us. 'Cock disappear from their inland quarters during the reign of prolonged severe weather and appear for a brief spell on the coast, and as they disappear in turn from the coast, the deduction one draws is that they take a southward line in search of open feeding grounds. Another deduction has often been drawn by some whose scope of observation is more local than that of others: to the effect that woodcock stay with us and starve during prolonged severe weather. This belief, however, I hold emphatically to be quite erroneous. A woodcock is found starving or starved, and it is assumed that all the other woodcock which flourished in the country a fortnight before are starving or starved also. The assumption is natural, though wrong. Of the certain proportion, a very small one, of 'cock who stay on when faced by an ever-decreasing food supply, nearly every bird must perish if the frost holds. Putting this certain small proportion aside, a proportion representing the least 'fit' instinctively, the woodcock has far too great reliance on his wing power, far too keen a

sense of direction, and far too shrewd a knowledge of the fact that towards the equator lie warmer lands, to remain in a northward island when he finds himself face to face with starvation and sees no likelihood of an improvement in the weather.

It is a mistake to suppose—and it is almost universally supposed—that the woodcock feeds entirely by night and never during the hours of daylight. As we have seen when noticing the normal feeding habits of the bird, it is the 'cock's custom to lie hidden in his woodland lair by day and to wing forth to his marshy feeding ground at dusk, returning to the covert at dawn. After a dark night, however, when his searchings for food have not been wholly successful, hunger asserts itself before the arrival of sundown, and the bird, becoming restless, will often, in a more or less methodical manner, search for the wherewithal to stay the demands of appetite, turning over the dead leaf and endeavouring, ineffectually, to probe the hard ground. I do not think that at such times the woodcock ever strays more than a very short distance, perhaps never more than a few yards, from the spot selected as a resting place for the day, nor do I think the bird ever seeks food during the morning. When, after a dark night, a 'cock is flushed from the shelter of a clump of holly in the afternoon, careful examina-

tion of the ground will frequently disclose unmistakable signs that the bird has been at work among the leaves.

After a day or two's severe frost the woodcock, being hard pressed, will seek for food almost throughout the hours of daylight. During such a period of pressure the bird would find incalculable difficulties in the way of discovering by night the kind of food upon which it is temporarily compelled to subsist: light sufficient for probing for worms in the open would be quite insufficient to enable 'cock to descry small snails among the withered leaves at the bottom of some sheltered ditch. Unless there was a moon at the time of the frost, woodcock would have to go quite foodless if they failed to search for food by day; if there was a moon, it is doubtful whether they would find more than a very occasional morsel in the dim light of the spots wherein they are compelled to feed during hard frost. That they know this well is proved by their temporary change of habit. Bog and water meadow being closed to them, streamlet and spring being frozen, they are driven for food to the deepest hollows of the woods, the most lightless of places. When bird after bird is found in such spots by the sportsman during severe frost, the reason is not, as is so generally supposed, that the 'cock are

there for the sake of shelter and warmth, but that they are turning day into night, searching while it is light for the make-shift food they would be unable to see after the fall of evening.

A solitary bird is the woodcock—perhaps there is none more solitary among all the avian race. Yet he is solitary in a peculiar way. Unless we looked closely into his solitariness we might almost be inclined to call him a bird of sociable habits.

All the movements of the woodcock, even, I think, when migrating, are independent of the movements of any other 'cock. Though a score of birds may temporarily occupy the same covert and nightly visit the same ground for their food, they have nothing whatever to do with one another. This living in the same daytime home and spending the night on the same feeding-ground gives the impression that they act in concert. But this they do not do. Each of them has its solitary resting-place; it takes no notice of any fellow 'cock at all; there is no going forth to the feeding-ground with another bird, or returning with another bird at dawn, or anything of the kind. Concert, truly, there is in their movements in that when a certain number of birds happen to occupy the same covert and nightly visit the same feeding ground they leave the covert at just about the same

time in the evening, and return to it at just about the same time in the morning. But this they do, not because real concert exists, but because each of them is constrained to obey precisely the same instinct in precisely the same manner. They frequent the same particular covert and the same particular feeding ground because that particular covert and that particular feeding ground have certain particular attractions for them—attractions which no one can satisfactorily fathom—and not because there is; for there is not, any bond between them like the bond which keeps naturally gregarious birds together.

Rightly or wrongly—this is not the mere dream of a dreamer, but the matured opinion of a student—I believe that the inland migrations of woodcock are never made by the birds with any mutual understanding. There comes to each bird in a covert the instinctive impulse—an impulse too mysterious for our cognisance—to make a shift to other quarters, and each bird, acting independently of all the other birds, obeys that impulse. Then why, it may be asked, do twenty birds suddenly appear in a covert which did not hold a single 'cock the previous day or perhaps any day during the previous month? The answer is: because a 'cock covert, a covert which has certain and unaccountable attractions for

woodcock, and in which woodcock are sure to be found if there are any birds in the district, attracts the individual woodcock. Those twenty birds which suddenly appear in a covert that did not hold a single bird the day before have not necessarily arrived in a body, nor have they necessarily come from the same covert of departure, nor have they necessarily come from the same district even. If there has been a general impulse of movement over a wide area, they may have dropped in from north, south, east, and west. The twenty birds, moving separately and independently, happened to strike this particular 'cock covert, and, influenced by its unaccountable attractions, each of them decided to make a home of it till the next impulse of movement should assert itself. The woodcock pitches by instinct upon a certain favourite covert and a certain feeding ground just as mysteriously and just as unerringly as the snipe pitches upon certain chosen spots. In both cases we have the demonstration of the same instinct, an instinct quite inexplicable. We see its outcome, and that is all. There may be two coverts but a mile apart with a stretch of marshy land between them, and as far as our own faculties are capable of interpreting things to us there may be no difference whatever between the conditions afforded respectively by

these two; yet year after year 'cock may be found to frequent the one covert freely and never to select the other.

The geographical range of the woodcock is practically co-extensive with that of the snipe. Probably it is more circumscribed to our eastward. Like the snipe, the woodcock as a general rule breeds in latitudes considerably higher than those in which it passes the winter. The bird's southward range extends as far as northern Africa. Two other species of woodcock closely resembling our own are found in the East Indian Islands and in New Guinea, and a smaller species exists in North America. Probably our woodcock is more numerous during the winter in Greece and Portugal than anywhere else. In the former country, fifty couple a day to a single gun is by no means a very unusual bag. Generally speaking, wherever snipe are found woodcock are found there too, the snipe being almost invariably far more numerous than the 'cock. Few birds have so wide a range as that of the woodcock and the snipe.

The flight of the woodcock is extremely strong and extremely rapid, though there are times when the bird will fly almost sluggishly, in such a way that one seeing it for the first time when it happened to be flying thus would never credit the 'cock with its

huge power of wing. After a light night, the birds having fed heavily, the forenoon finds them as a whole minus a good deal of their accustomed dash; after a dark night, during which they have fed scantily, they will fly as swiftly as—well, as very few birds indeed can fly. The woodcock adopts the same twisting tactics as those practised by the snipe, swerving to right and left in order to put on the maximum of speed in the minimum of time. 'Cock usually twist less after a light night than after a dark one, and less in dull or misty weather than when the weather is bright.

Probably ninety per cent. at least of the woodcock shot in the British Islands are migrants. If the weather is suitable—the following chapter will deal with the subject of migration in full—the migrant birds begin to reach us about the middle of the first fortnight in October. The main body appears some three or four weeks later when the season is a normal one. If the weather in Northern Europe remains open, woodcock may continue to come into our country as late as early December. The migrants leave us again between the third week of February and the first week of April; here again the state of the weather determining the time of their movements.

Though woodcock breed with us much more

numerously than was once the case, there can be no doubt that the birds have been steadily decreasing in numbers for many years past, which means, of course, that fewer migrants reach us now than in days gone by. Though unreservedly admitting the reality of this decrease, I do not consider it so great as people often maintain. There enters here the question whether the diminution in numbers is not to some considerable extent merely apparent, whether we must not take into consideration the modern system of shooting in the matter, whether the decrease in the number of 'cock bagged may not have distorted the right appreciation of the actual decrease in the yearly head of woodcock in the country.

For these reasons. A couple of generations ago woodcock were very much more often especially sought after than now. There were no big days then, coverts were many times more frequently shot through during a season than they are in our own generation. A sharp look-out was then kept for the birds. The fact that a 'cock had been seen was sufficient for an immediate call to arms and an expedition in search of the fall that one 'cock might have heralded : a touch of likely weather, likely judging by previous seasons was sufficient for a similar call and a similar search.

That was formerly. Now fashion has given us big

days, tame bred pheasants, and an opening of the covert-beating season several weeks later than the date on which the season was really opened not such a great number of years ago. We do not keep that special look-out for woodcock now ; if a woodcock or two be flushed by a wandering keeper in Woodcock Bottom at the end of October, we do not straightway go and bundle our pheasants out of the coverts on the chance of killing a few couple of 'cock. What we do is to keep those coverts quiet till a long time after the season has lawfully opened, perhaps even till Christmas or thereabouts, and then shoot them three, or possibly four, or now and then it may be even five, times before February 1. And then, though we may kill 'cock up till March 1, we never think of disturbing the coverts again till the following Christmas or its thereabouts. Woodcock in these coverts are now only accessory to the bag of pheasants, and no longer a special object of search to the owner of the shooting.

If we consider all this, we see at once and clearly to how large a degree the decrease in the number of 'cock may be merely apparent, how the diminution in the number of 'cock killed may mislead one in forming opinions about the actual decrease. The game books of a landowner's father and grandfather

may show that for two generations an average yearly bag of fifty couple of 'cock was made on the manor; the game book of the present tenant may only show an average bag of five couple; and yet in good seasons if he began his covert season on the same date as his father and grandfather began theirs, and kept the same look-out for woodcock as they did, the manor might still yield a bag not very far removed from the fifty couple. Nor is it as it would be if the woodcock were a stay-at-home like the pheasant. The pheasants are always at hand to be killed: the 'cock shift their quarters continually. What are the chances that a man will find woodcock in his coverts on any one of those very few big days that constitute the sum total of his covert beating? They are really very small chances. He *may* happen to hit off a day when the birds are there, but that is all. Without any stretch of fancy, one can imagine no decrease at all having taken place in the numbers of 'cock in England, and there being a non-varying head of birds in the country every season—both quite erroneous conclusions—and some years being tip-top years while others are almost blanks, just because luck decides at one time that a large proportion of the dates fixed for covert beating shall synchronize with the times at which woodcock will be in the coverts when they are

shot, and at another time decides that on the days these coverts are shot the 'cock shall be elsewhere.

In writing upon the subject of the decrease in the number of woodcock, figures of course are quite out of the question ; but one may believe that there has been a steady diminution for upwards of a century. The decrease has been most remarked upon during the past ten or fifteen years. I attribute this mainly to the change that has come about in the seasons, and partly, to a very small extent comparatively, to the persecution of the birds abroad, the market value of the 'cock being quite as forcible an incentive to slaughter among the ultra-British potting fraternity as among the British. In Norway, for instance, a sharp watch is kept near the coast during the periods of migration, when the birds are shot and trapped in large numbers. Captain Symonds, writing in the 'Globe' three or four years ago, said:—

Some two years since, while in Norway, I was talking to a well-to-do Norwegian, who spoke English well. The conversation turned on woodcocks, and I asked him if he got many. He said sometimes in the winter, when the birds came to the coast, they were caught in traps, or shot when they stopped quiet, being tired after flying ; but the best time was in the spring when they were making love.

As to the change in seasons and its effect upon

our head of 'cock : The open winters of to-day allow woodcock to exist on the Continent in latitudes in which they could not have existed when the winters were 'old fashioned ;' and thus a stream of birds which was wont to reach us from the eastward and north-eastward has gradually diminished and is still gradually dwindling—and will perhaps dwindle entirely out of existence. Of course, a statement of this kind cannot be proved, but its accuracy is probable. It has been maintained that the long and severe frost of 1890—or was it 1891? I am not quite sure of the year—which was the only old-fashioned winter known to the younger generation, killed off so many 'cock that our own stock—the stock of Western Europe should have been the term used—was almost annihilated, and that the present scarcity of the birds is directly and wholly attributable to that reason. But this I cannot in any way agree with : I do not believe that woodcock have ever allowed themselves to be starved in large numbers. As has been already said, their instinct takes them to the coast when severe weather sets in, and almost immediately prompts them to southward migration unless the weather breaks up. Thus the majority : the few, the least 'fit,' instinctively stay behind and starve. During this particular frost several 'cock were

found dead by the side of the frozen water-courses in one of the islands of the Hebrides. Many people interested in bird migration, a matter about which we still have much to learn, do not sufficiently take into account special migration due to special exigencies—migration apart from the regular tides of autumn and spring. How far this severe winter, that of 1890 or 1891, affected countries to the south of us I have no means at hand whereby to ascertain, but I am under the impression that the rigours of Southern Europe were such that woodcock could scarcely find a living this side of the Mediterranean. What would have happened had all the woodcock remained that winter in the latitudes they selected the previous autumn as suited to their residence till the time of the spring flight? Simply an enormous proportion, very nearly all, would have been done to death by starvation, such a proportion that it would take very many years before the stock could reach its original strength. Yet the few following woodcock seasons were normal, as modern seasons go, while the season of 1894-5 was the best 'cock season we have had for a long time—fifteen years at least. It was in early January, 1895, that Lord Ardilaun made the record bag of 'cock, killing, with eight guns, 508 birds in one day. Instead of starving in the long frost of

1890 or 1891, the woodcock that were in the British Islands, as well as those in countries similarly affected, pursued a southward course till they discovered land where a decent living might be gained, and most of our home-breeding birds found their way back to us in the spring. If 'cock possessed no instinct for special migration under special circumstances, the old-fashioned winters would have practically exterminated the species. The birds found dead or dying from starvation after a certain number of days' continuous severe frost represent but a small section of their race, and the deductions often drawn from the finding of them are mere guess-work. As well say that every year large numbers of woodcock stay and starve in Norway as that large numbers stay and starve in our own country when we happen to have an old-fashioned winter.

Reverting for just a moment to the change in the seasons as bearing upon the modern scarcity of woodcock. Birds—I am dealing with probabilities—which used to reach us from the north-east and east, and given a series of old-fashioned winters setting in on old-fashioned dates would again do so, now take a southerly line, having found that the modern winter allows them to exist comfortably on the Continent in British latitudes or but little below them. Should

severe weather set in after the autumn migration is over, these birds would then have to take a line to the north-west if they wished to visit us, a course altogether against their instincts. Instead of doing this, they work southward under the pressure of frost ; though hard weather setting in after the autumn migration is practically over, say between November 21 and December 7, brings us a fair fall of 'cock, these are only some of what have been caught at the time well above Parallel 50, and represent but a modest proportion of what would have come to us in a south-westerly line had there been hard weather on the Continent at the time it was accustomed to set in during the old-fashioned winters. Briefly and dogmatically, the change in the seasons has steadily told upon the bird's instinct to take a south-westerly line from its Scandinavian breeding grounds ; year after year it has more fully appreciated the non-necessity of making a lengthy over-sea journey ; instead of making such a journey, it takes a southward line, adhering to the mainland—and the British gunner sighs in vain for the days of auld lang syne. To-day it is usually almost as much summer as winter when woodcock migration is in full swing. When once the autumn migration is over, the migratory instinct proper dies out, and when further movement

happens to be forced upon the bird by the weather, that movement is towards the south.

A popular idea that the decrease in the number of immigrant 'cock is due to their eggs being sought for and eaten by North Europeans is quite fallacious. The woodcock nests in the wildest and most unpopulated parts of Scandinavia and Northern Russia, and nests there with absolute immunity from the attentions of human egg-stealers.

CHAPTER II

THE 'COCK AS MIGRANT AND NURSE

THE migration of the woodcock is too interesting both to the ornithologist and the sportsman to be dealt with briefly, and I hope I may not be deemed tedious while discussing the subject. Local migration, that is, migration within our own borders, as more immediately concerning the sporting world, will be treated in the shooting section.

As we have already seen, our migrant 'cock reach us from Northern Europe. While the majority almost undoubtedly come direct from the shores of Norway and Sweden, there can be no question that a greater or smaller proportion work southward to the Danish, German, and Dutch coasts—from Sweden, Norway, and Northern Russia—and start their journey to us in a westerly line.

The distance from the southernmost point of Norway to the Norfolk coast is roughly four hundred

and fifty miles; the number of miles dividing the westernmost point of Norway from the easternmost point on the Scotch coast is roughly two hundred and seventy-five miles.

The speed at which birds travel while migrating, weather conditions being not unfavourable to their flight, largely transcends the speed they exercise on other occasions. This statement is quite *ex parte*, of course. We do not yet know all that we ought to know about bird migration by a very long way, and there exists a large mass of widely varying opinions on the matter.

The speed of the woodcock—one of the very swiftest and most strongly flying birds—when migrating under favourable conditions is no doubt enormous, but as 'cock, under such conditions, invariably reach our shores during the hours of darkness it will always be impossible to make observations which would decide the question of the birds' speed. We can only draw inferences from the speed of birds whose habit it is to make their oversea passage by day. A bird that lends itself better than any other to observation in this connection is the hooded crow.

On various occasions the migration of hooded crows between Heligoland and the Humber has been accurately timed, Gatke, an eminent ornithologist and

observer, having been mainly responsible for the necessary arrangements. Gatke lived in Heligoland for many years. The strict accuracy of his records has been doubted, but to the minds of the ornithological world at large the results arrived at are quite conclusive.

Hooded crows were timed by Gatke and his coadjutors to pass over Heligoland at a certain time, taking a line which would carry them direct to the Humber, and to reach the Humber in three hours. If this had been noticed only once or twice there would be no real evidence, for the birds which were seen to arrive on this part of the English coast might have started from the coast of the Continent further north or further south than Heligoland, and might have started much earlier in the day and therefore made a much slower journey. But continuous observation yielded the same results every time : over and over again the birds were seen passing Heligoland at about eight o'clock in the morning, the stream continuing till about two o'clock in the afternoon, and in all cases, the weather being normal, the in-coming stream at the Humber began about eleven o'clock in the morning and ended about five o'clock in the afternoon. The distance between the Humber and Heligoland being about three hundred and twenty miles, we find the

migration speed of the hooded crow—the bird we know as such a heavy, slow-flying bird while resident with us—to be over a hundred miles an hour. No one with an open mind can doubt that the birds which pass Heli-goland are the same birds which reach the Humber only three hours later. From the one point to the other stretches their beaten track, if one may use such a term. Year after year they take the same course, as no doubt they have taken it for ages; fixed instinct gathers them together at a certain time of the year on a certain part of the Schleswig-Holstein shore and impels them in a certain line; and following this line they land season after season on the same certain part of the coast of England. Organised observation would almost assuredly disclose other lines followed by hooded crows when migrating from the coast of the Continent to our own.

The longest flight over unbroken sea known to be made by migrating birds is that of the Virginian plover, which nests in Labrador and spends its winter in Brazil. The distance between the North Brazilian coast and the coast of Labrador is about three thousand two hundred miles.

If the migration speed of so clumsy and slow-flying a bird as the hooded crow is over a hundred miles an hour, what must be the migration speed of so

dashing and swift a bird as the woodcock? Perhaps a hundred and fifty miles an hour, a speed which would enable it to cross from the south of Norway to the north of Scotland in less than two hours. A hundred and fifty miles an hour falls far short of the velocity with which birds pass through the air under certain circumstances. Their speed, when descending from a great height to a distant point, vastly exceeds the speed suggested as that of the woodcock on its migration journey; but, when descending, a bird has the same augmentation of speed from gravitation that a cyclist receives when going down hill. Four miles to the east of Heligoland are certain oyster-beds on which, at low tide, birds congregate in enormous numbers at the time of the spring and autumn migration. Duck, curlew, plover, and other birds, when descending from a considerable elevation, have been repeatedly timed to cover these four miles in one minute, that is at the prodigious speed of two hundred and forty miles an hour for the base line only.

Critics have often denied that migrating birds can travel at the velocity claimed for them by observers, because the swiftest of birds seen flying near the earth at non-migration periods of the year—birds living their ordinary life, that is—never attain a speed of anything approaching a hundred miles an hour. This

is quite true; doubt or denial is not to be wondered at when one's notice is directed to, for instance, the hooded crow, and one is then told that this bird, so sluggishly flapping about the shore, can cover three hundred miles or so on end at a speed of something like double that of an express train. In the present state of our knowledge, the explanation of the great speed of migrating birds compared with their normal speed is impossible.

There are, however, two contributing factors—perhaps the only ones—which seem practically certain. First, at the time of the spring and autumn migration Nature braces up the system of a bird to a point at which it can exercise energy to a degree quite impossible to it during other periods of the year, and at the same time brings into play a powerful sub-instinct to the migratory instinct proper—namely, to steel itself up to and plunge into a far more sustained physical effort than ever it feels called upon to make at other times. The only real effort of flight made by the bird at these other times is that short, sudden rush to escape from real or imaginary danger. When fairly on the wing, and not considering itself any longer in peril, I do not think it ever makes a call upon its fullest powers of flight.

Why should it fly at the highest pressure when there is no need for such a proceeding? What wild animal known to us in Britain exercises its fullest powers for more than the briefest time, save under the stimulus of fear? I think it quite likely that the mallard we come upon suddenly calls into play greater exertion during the first hundred yards of its flight than it does during a thousand yards when no longer under the influence of fear. The difference between the energy exerted by those golden plover which dash by us at lightning speed, compared with the energy exerted by them when covering the same distance during their migration flight, is very likely about the same as the difference between the energy we exert when walking and when running. Who ever saw a greenfinch travel at any other time as it travels when chased by a hawk? Assuredly no one. The bird, knowing it to be a question of life or death, flies, perhaps, three times as swiftly as it ever flies in the ordinary course of things, or as any human being can make it fly, even when he fires off a gun only a dozen yards away. Under special circumstances—the influence of fear—the greenfinch exerts energy much greater than it exerts at any other time, and flies with much greater speed; just as under special circumstances, the force of the instinct to cover the journey

in the briefest time possible, before the wind or the weather changes, the hooded crow exerts energy at the times of migration which it never thinks of exerting, and probably could not exert, at any other time.

There can be little doubt that the instinct of exerting great and prolonged energy when making the migration journey is built upon the fear of weather changes. The shorter time the journey takes, the less is the risk of a sudden adverse gale. Birds must always face this risk. Every year large numbers perish through the springing up of gales, which drive them from their right course or keep them battling against the wind till they succumb to exhaustion. Considering the changeability of the weather, the disastrous effects which an adverse wind has upon the flight of migrating birds, and the way in which necessity and experience have produced bird instincts, it would be a matter of considerable wonderment if migratory birds had not evolved an instinct to make a huge effort, to exert themselves to their very highest powers to effect their uncertain passage from shore to shore in the shortest possible time. Nature has lent physical assistance to this instinct, and thus the migrating bird has not only the potent instinct to push on with might and main, but also the special

physical power, special to those two periods of the year, to put the instinct into effect.

The carrier pigeon has often been put into the box as a witness against the high speed of migrating birds ; but his evidence is not worth much. In the first place, if he ever possessed the migration instinct, civilisation has killed it, and it is only under the influence of this instinct that the wild bird makes a lengthy journey at abnormal speed. In the second place, even if he have in a subdued form the instinct of migration, his civilised life places him outside the conditions which brace up the system of the wild migratory bird twice in the year, and bring into active play the sub-instinct to the migration instinct proper—that of exerting his braced-up system to its highest powers in order to complete a risky journey in the minimum of time : he has not the *fear* of the migrating bird, for, whereas he can rest during a protracted gale, the migrating bird stands a very good chance of being drowned. In the third place, the carrier-pigeon never attains an altitude approaching to that assumed by migrating birds.

Secondly—it may be for this reason alone ; I am only following the possibilities of a matter about which we know very little indeed—the migrating bird by flying at a great height gains a considerable

advantage in wing power over the same bird flying near the earth. This again critics contest, and they argue on strong grounds. To take an example : ' It has been repeatedly asserted that birds attain a rate of over two hundred miles an hour by flying at such a height that the air, being rarefied, offers only a slight resistance to the forward motion of their bodies. A very slight knowledge of mechanical principles would show that the resistance of the air to their wings, required for propelling them forward, must diminish in exactly the same degree ' (I might remark that the writer of these words apparently loses sight of, or is ignorant of, the fact that 'resistance' is not merely afforded by the air during a bird's flight, but by the air, the set of the wind, and the force of gravitation combined). But the scientific world said on the ground of mechanical principles that a railway train could never keep on the metals ; and we are still a long way from knowing what mechanics will and will not allow.

That the migrating bird does actually derive advantage from flying at a great height seems indubitable on the evidence of the bird itself. If it did not thus derive advantage, why should it uselessly expend the energy necessary to climb to such a height ? It has been argued that the reason why such a height is

attained by migrating birds is that by placing themselves at a great elevation they are enabled to see the coast for which they are making sooner than would be the case if they flew at a lower level, and are thus able to minimise the risk of losing their way, as well as having the advantage of longer daylight should their journey happen to be delayed. But woodcock start their journey at dusk and finish it long before dawn, and not only this, but they reach us more numerous on a misty night than on a clear one. I believe, rightly or wrongly, that the sense of orientation is developed to such a degree in birds possessing the instinct of migration for long distances over sea in the lines taken by their ancestors for countless generations, that they need no further assistance whatsoever in determining the trend of their passage ; that, gales apart, it guides them unerringly to their destination ; and that any guidance by vision is quite unnecessary to them. How else do woodcock, flying by night, find their way year after year to the same points on our coast ? We could scarcely credit them with a knowledge of the position of the constellations even if they made a practice of never crossing the sea save on clear nights.

Fully to discuss what the possible advantage, maintaining on the evidence of the birds themselves

that there is an advantage, gained by flying at a great height may be would entail far greater length of writing than these pages will allow. The explanation will be afforded in due course by the solution of the problem of mechanical human flight. When this problem is solved we shall find that we can fly with greater, probably much greater, speed through the higher strata of the air than through the lower.

What the greatest height attained by migrating birds may be no one can pretend to say. The geese we see coming over our coast line on the very borderland of the range of human vision when applied to an object as small as a goose with outstretched wings are probably at lower, more likely than not a much lower, altitude than that at which they made the major part of their passage. I have made out fieldfares off the coast so high that they were mere specks when viewed through a powerful glass. And these birds were almost certainly descending at the time.

Deductions from all we know at present seem to point to the conclusion that all migrating birds, on leaving the shore, mount steadily upwards for the first so many miles till they reach an altitude which gives them the most favourable conditions for sustained flight at their highest speed, and that they continue at this altitude till within a certain distance of the shore for

which they are bound. This, of course, in normal weather. If they meet a contrary wind at their adopted altitude they no doubt quickly seek a lower, or perhaps a higher, one. When the weather is against them, and their journey has been consequently prolonged till their strength fails, many of them sink lower and lower till they find themselves struggling feebly onwards only just above the water long before their destination is reached; and when they reach it at last they arrive in a state of utter exhaustion. Enormous numbers of birds drop into the sea and are drowned when boisterous weather prevails at the seasons of migration.

In normal weather, migrant woodcock land upon the east coast of England and Scotland, and after a brief rest at once begin to spread themselves over the whole of our islands, favouring certain districts as suited to their winter residence, and visiting other districts merely occasionally and in very small numbers.

Those 'cock which reach the Norfolk and Suffolk coast generally show that their journey has had but little effect upon them, though sometimes they are found to be weak and in poor condition. That their comparatively short flight has, however, made some considerable tax upon their strength seems certain, on account of their disinclination to continue the

journey beyond the coast line till they have had a lengthy rest. Local shore shooters, always on the look-out for woodcock at the time of the autumn migration, often punish the birds severely. I have known ten couple of 'cock to be killed at dawn from a single strip of marram only about two hundred and fifty yards by about twenty yards. When there has been a large fall of woodcock during the night, birds may be found at times in the strangest places, places where one would least expect to find a 'cock at any other time of the year. Not so very long ago a walled-in garden in a populous village on the east coast yielded its owner one or more 'cock every morning for a week, all the birds he shot being plump and fat. Unless disturbed, where woodcock pitch on the night of their arrival, there they rest till dusk sets in the following day: though one day the country near the coast may abound with them, the next day you may seek in vain for a single bird.

It is rarely that the birds are seen actually arriving, but an instance is quoted by a sportsman and naturalist, who signs himself 'Moorman.' Accompanied by one of his men he went round one evening, carrying a shaded lantern, to seek evidence of poachers' work. His attention was called to the sound of an occasional bird flying, and between the

tops of the firs he and his man distinctly saw one or two birds pitch. He had just brought his lantern to bear on the ground when his man suddenly cried, 'There he goes !' made a dash down the hedgeside, and the next instant was sprawling at full length with a woodcock beneath him. 'I've got 'im, Master !' he cried, breathlessly, and sure enough he had, the bird being more frightened than hurt.

The woodcock which reach the north-east coast of England are almost certainly birds which have started from the Dutch or German coast : those which reach the shores of Norfolk and Suffolk are almost-certainly birds which have left the shore of Holland. Many years ago there was a large fall of starving 'cock in the streets of a Suffolk coast town, birds so weak that numbers of them were caught by the inhabitants. These birds probably started from Norway or Sweden, and were driven by gales far down the North Sea before they could effect a landing. No doubt the birds which sometimes now reach the Norfolk and Suffolk coast in the skeleton stage have passed through the same experience. It seems unlikely that the instinct of birds leaving the Scandinavian coast would ever prompt them to take so southward a line as one leading to the coast of Suffolk. Nothing, of course, can be said with certainty on the subject, but



'I'VE GOT 'IM!'

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it is a reasonable supposition that the instinct of orientation in woodcock causes all the birds to steer west or but a little south of west. Thus we should have birds which left the Norwegian coast landing in Scotland, others which started from Denmark striking our shore north of Lincolnshire, and those which left Germany and Holland making their appearance south of the Humber—all this roughly, and, to repeat, in normal weather. That birds starting from Norway not infrequently cut matters too fine in the direction of their flight, so that they thus miss the coast of Northern Scotland, and have to work back again when they discover from the undue length of their journey that they have overshot the mark—eventually if their strength holds out landing on the western coast of Scotland or Ireland and even the west coast of England—appears to point strongly to the assumption that the line they take by instinct is never very far south of west.

When, however, woodcock land on our western coast at the time of the prevalence of stormy weather, their doing so may more rightly be attributed to unfavourable winds having driven them out of their course than to their having willingly taken a line tending too much towards the north. That woodcock, like other birds, are frequently driven out of their course by gales which spring up after they have left their starting-

point is certain ; for their arrival, fleshless and starving, on the western seaboard is by no means infrequent, in fact occurs time after time under such circumstances. It has been put forward that on a dark night birds of such strong and swift flight as 'cock may well be supposed at times to pass right over our islands without knowing that dry land lies beneath them and find themselves at daybreak a long way to the west ; and that many of the birds that beat back over the Atlantic are birds which have passed over us in the darkness. This is possible, of course, but I do not think it likely.

One might say, speaking generally, that if there come a continuance of strong winds from the south-east round to the north-west during the few weeks woodcock are moving from their summer quarters, few birds will reach us and it will be a poor 'cock year : if the weather be still during that period it will be a moderate or fair year ; while if the wind hold anywhere to the northward of these two points the year is likely to prove a good one. Suitable winds coming after the main body of 'cock have moved southwards will not repair the shortage ; for the birds having once passed south and found themselves amid comfortable surroundings will remain there for the winter, or will work further south on the mainland if frost compels

them to move at all. Having once left to the north of them the point from which they would have started for the British Islands if they had not been deterred by adverse winds, they give up all thoughts of visiting us that season.

The woodcock, like all other birds, prefers a side wind for migration. Here again space does not allow one to indulge in full discussion of a particularly interesting matter. Briefly: a head wind is inimical to sustained flight unless it should be only a breeze, or but little more, and then it is of direct assistance; and a stern wind is at all times inimical to sustained flight, for if merely a breeze it lessens the resisting power of the air, whilst if it amount to a strong current the resisting power is decreased in proportion.¹

Woodcock never reach us in daylight except when the weather has been unfavourable to their flight, and their journey has thus been delayed, or when, either through having taken too northerly a line or having been driven too far north by gales, they have missed our islands and found themselves compelled to retrace their wing-beats over the Atlantic.

¹ The migrating woodcock flies with greater swiftness than that of the current if flying with the wind, this being why the resisting power of the air is lessened. When a bird flies at a lower speed than the speed of the current, it receives assistance from the current, but not otherwise.

It is an open question whether woodcock collect together and start in falls at the time of the autumn migration, or whether each bird of a fall that reaches us acts on his own account, obeying a common instinctive impulse which prompts him to leave the northern shore at the same time that all his fellows leave it and to follow the same line that they follow. Judging by the habits of the bird while within our islands, I incline strongly to the belief that the latter is the case, that instinct impels him to make up his mind to start on the cross-sea journey at the same time that it impels other 'cock in the locality to do the same thing. When a dozen of these solitary birds occupy different nooks scattered about a hundred-acre wood, and all of them shift their quarters on the same night, it appears to me very much more likely that, obeying a common instinctive impulse, they act quite independently of one another than that they gather together first and then start together. In the same way I consider it very much more likely that at the time of the autumn migration the birds start independently than that they start in falls. They may, and no doubt often do, pick one another up at sea and end the journey in bunches. Bird instinct is much more potent and unerring than many people imagine. The instinct that prompts a hundred inde-

pendently acting woodcock to leave the same part of the foreign shore at dusk on the same night, and to take the same flight line, is powerful enough to bring them independently of one another to the same point on the British coast, where they are found the next morning within a strictly defined radius; this giving high colour to the supposition that they started together like a pack of swallows.

As woodcock pair before they leave us, there is little doubt that they make the return journey in pairs. There are certain statements on record to the effect that 'cock have been known to assemble on the coast in bodies prior to their departure in the spring; but such supposed cases are few and far between, and their accuracy may be considered open to some considerable doubt. Enquiries made by me among life-long observers, at the English end of perhaps the most largely used of all the aerial highways of migrating 'cock, have never elicited even a tradition of such an event.

It seems really true that members of the Scolopax family at certain times, and under certain circumstances, develop rough ideas—and carry them out—on the subject of surgery. In connection with this I quote the words of Professor Victor Fatio, merely remarking that the reputation of the writer may be

taken as placing the matter beyond doubt. M. Fatio, an eminent ornithologist, has probably a wider and more thorough knowledge of the *Scolopacidae* than any other man living. He has for years made a special study of these birds, and has shot them and observed them in every country in Asia as well as in Europe and America. The quotation I give, translated into English by M. Fatio himself, is an extract from the report of a lecture delivered by him before the Geneva Physiological and Natural History Society on April 19, 1888 :—

Monsieur Victor Fatio relates that when shooting woodcock (*Scolopax rusticola*) he had often noticed that this bird when wounded manages to make for himself, with the aid of his beak and feathers, a very ingenious dressing ; whichever the case may be, he knows exactly how to apply a plaster to a bleeding wound or to fix a solid ligature round a broken limb. He shot, one day, one of these birds which had an old wound on its breast, and which was covered by a large plaster composed of small, downy feathers plucked from different parts of its body and fixed firmly on the wound by the dry blood. Another time he found another plaster made in exactly the same way on a bird's back. Twice he found woodcocks which had ligatures of feathers tied and twisted round the part where the bone had been fractured. In one case the right leg, just above the cartilage, was strongly but quite recently bound round with feathers which the bird had taken from its back and breast. In the other case the cartilage itself, which

was almost completely healed, still had the band that had maintained it in position. The most curious and at the same time the most unfortunate case was that of a woodcock which had both of its legs fractured by shot, and which was only picked up the following day. The poor bird had put feather plasters and bandages round both its legs, using one bandage only for one leg, and that was broken in two different places ; but as it was obliged to operate in a most awkward position, and as it was unable to use its claws, it was unable to get rid of some feathers that had stuck and curled round the end of its beak, and which were causing it to die of hunger. Although its wounds were splendidly dressed, and although it was still able to fly, it was terribly thin. This indisputable proof of the intelligence of a bird which has always been considered rather stupid, because people have put a wrong interpretation on its name,¹ appears sufficiently interesting to be inscribed in the annals of biology.

As we have seen, it is the habit of the woodcock to rest by day in the shelter of the wood or copse, to fly to its feeding grounds at dusk, and to return to its shelter at daybreak the following morning. We have also seen that it is a further habit of the bird to lay its eggs and hatch its young in the places, or in similar places, it uses as daytime haunts at other periods of the year—that is, places always remote to some

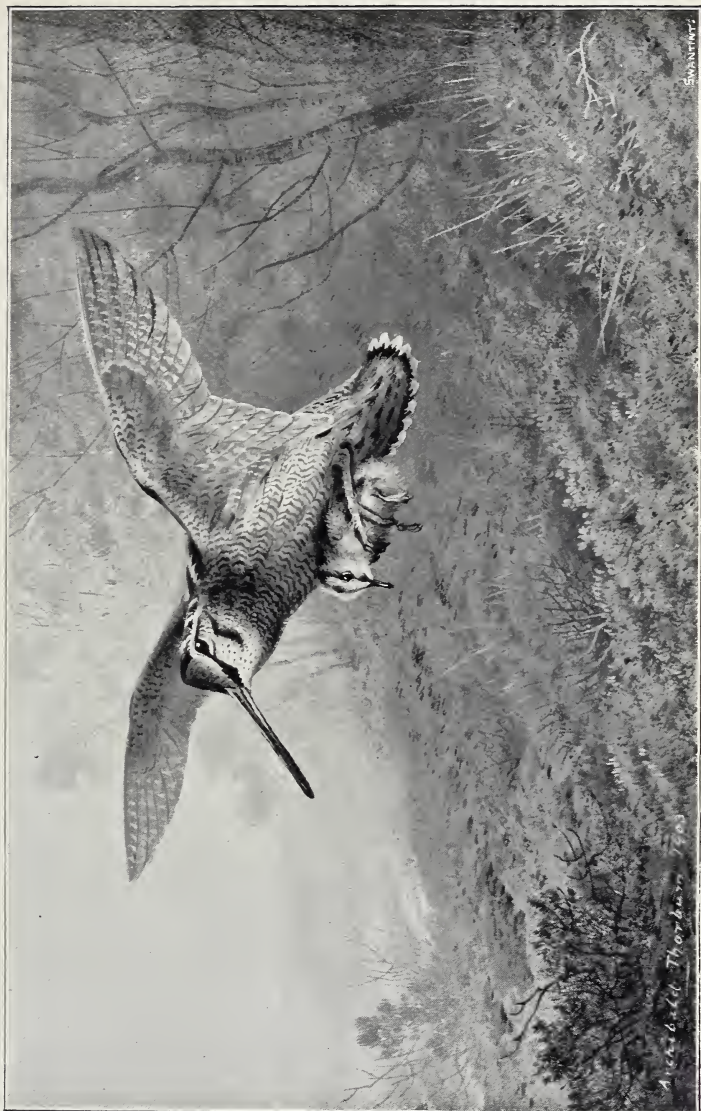
¹ In France the woodcock is called *grand bec*, while the same term is used to designate a stupid person.

extent, and often far remote, from the low-lying land where its food is obtained.

Given a hungry brood of young woodcock in the middle of a wood a mile or more from those water meadows which are the nearest ground whereon the parent birds can find soft surface soil and an abundant supply of worms, one can imagine the work that would be entailed upon the parents if they had to make backward and forward journeys the whole night through in order to satisfy the cravings of the youngsters.

But the woodcock has to make no such journeyings for the purpose of supplying its young with food. Far back in its history, the bird adopted the practice of nesting at a distance from its feeding ground, and then there began a habit, which no doubt soon became a fixed instinct, having for its object the avoidance of the labour of feeding a brood at a distance from the spot where the food had to be procured. This habit was that of carrying its young to the feeding ground every evening and carrying them back to the nest or the neighbourhood of the nest every morning. The woodcock is the only bird, or at least the only British bird, which has evolved or been under the necessity of evolving such an instinct.

Opinions have differed greatly as to the exact



SPRINGFIELD

Archibald Thorburn, 1905

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manner in which the woodcock holds a young one when flying with it from the nest to the feeding ground. One writer, for instance, has told us that the bird places a young one upon her 'spread feet,' and then grips it between the toes and the breast; another that the young one is held between the bill and the breast; whilst another, only a few years ago, published the statement that 'the hen removes her chicks one at a time, from place to place, not in her bill nor yet in her claws (as some "observers of nature" gravely assert), but by placing them between her thighs and pressing them close to her body with her bill.' The woodcock, however, does undoubtedly carry her young in her claws, and does not use her beak at all. Mr. C. B. Moffat, writing in '*The Irish Naturalist*' in 1899, says:—

On the morning of April 19th the female, as I approached, sat closer than had been her wont, and on rising I was almost immediately struck with a curious yellowish object that seemed to hang from between her legs. The bird's flight was slower than usual, and her long bill was plainly seen to be directed forwards, in the ordinary attitude, and not in any way used to steady or support the object carried.

The late Duke of Beaufort wrote:—

In the New Forest, in the year 1850, I came upon a female woodcock watering her three young ones at a

rivulet. She picked up one in each claw and flew off with them. I hid in a high gorse brake close by, and saw her return in four or five minutes and pick up the remaining bird also in her claw.

I believe this is the only instance on record in which the parent bird has been seen carrying two young ones at the same time. The way a woodcock starts is, I fancy, to grasp, say, the left wing of the young bird near the body with, say, the left foot, and then to spring from the ground on the free foot, afterwards using the free foot to grasp the young bird's other wing. The reason why so much misconception has existed as to the way in which the woodcock holds a young one when flying with it is that only rarely is the bird seen performing the feat except at a time when the light is so dim that accurate observations are impossible.

CHAPTER III

THE WOODCOCK'S BILL AND HIS VARIOUS SENSES

MANY rustics still entertain the old-world idea that the woodcock, and, of course, the snipe too, 'lives on suction,' in other words, that the bird's diet consists of mud. The form of the beak, so we must assume, and the way in which it is used to probe the soft soil, gave rise to this very unscientific notion. It was seen that where a bird had been feeding there were holes in the ground, and therefore it was supposed that the long bill had been given in order to enable its owner to thrust it deep into the earth and suck up as much mud as happened to be required for a meal.

The beak of the woodcock and other members of the family is a striking example of Nature's beneficent workings, through evolution, on behalf of her creatures, in order to supply them with organs adapted to their especial requirements. The ques-

tion of the acquirement of food is at the bottom of most of the schemes of Nature when moulding and developing her handiwork. While age by age she gradually lengthened the neck and fore-legs of the giraffe in order that the animal's reach might be extended and its supply of green leaves thus very largely increased, eventually producing the ungainly, extraordinary looking quadruped with which man, or rather African man, has been familiar since he became a reasoning being, she extended, for utility in the opposite direction, the bill of the woodcock and his circle of relatives, or more probably, perhaps, the bill of the common ancestor of all this family of birds. And well, indeed, has she equipped the *Scolopacidæ* in the matter of the organ wherewith they are compelled to gain their livelihood.

This organ, the bill of woodcock and his kinsfolk, has been extended to such lengthiness that the birds are rendered independent of the whims of worms, their principal food, in a way quite unknown to or unimagined by the thrush or the robin. Both these latter, as well as all other worm-eating birds unrelated to the woodcock, are poorly provided for in the matter of the worm-culling implement; a fact which may be taken to show that their struggle for existence has not been nearly so great as that of

Scolopax, or that but a short way back in the length of time that has seen bird-life flourishing on our planet worms were merely a supplementary form of diet, and not, as at the present, the main one. The robin of to-day apparently delights more in worms than in any other kind of food, and has a keen appreciation of adventitious human aid in providing him with a ready supply, as we see when he follows the spade-carrying gardener down the path, well knowing that the tool will disclose a teeming larder. Anyone making friends with a young robin, and going to work quietly and carefully, can soon so far tame the bird—and can keep it always tame—that it will come in response to an accustomed call and pick worms or crumbs from the hand.

The thrush, taking this bird merely for comparison with the woodcock, wishing to catch a worm must first see that worm. Thus the question of its supply of this particular form of diet is strictly governed by the hour of the day and the degree of moisture on or near the surface of the ground, the movements of the worms being ruled by these two considerations. The thrush, however, unlike the woodcock, is not almost entirely dependent upon worms for his sustenance. He has an advantage in this matter over the woodcock in being a day-feeding

bird, and when daybreak shows him that there are no worms to be found on the surface of the land he quickly turns his attention to poking about in any likely corner for a breakfast of snails or some other palatable food. The woodcock, save under exceptional circumstances, feeding almost entirely by night—when under these exceptional circumstances he feeds during daylight it is but scantily—and living practically altogether upon worms, would gain but a sorry repast unless he were made independent of the conditions of weather which decide whether or no the worms will feel disposed to show themselves above the surface of the ground ; and if, whatever the state of the land might be, worms came to the surface of the ground every night, he would be immensely handicapped in his search for them during a long spell in each month ; for vastly better though his sight undoubtedly is by night than that of any day-feeding bird, we cannot credit him with the power of seeing worms on a moonless night as the thrush sees them by day.

When it is said that the length of the bill of the woodcock is about three inches, and that the bird thrusts it into the ground as far as the nostrils, it will be realised how immeasurably superior the organ is for its special purposes and uses over the short

bills of surface-feeding birds. A special use of the bill being necessary to the woodcock, Nature produced an organ suited in every detail to this special use ; in the same manner that she twisted the mandibles of the crossbill in order that their owner might have a perfect tool for extracting the seeds from fir-cones, and curved the upper mandible of the parrot till she had produced, not only a bill pre-eminently adapted to securing and breaking up the food of the bird, but also the equivalent to a third foot for climbing—or rather, considering its position, more than an equivalent to a third foot.

But while its length is indispensable to successfully exploring matter beneath the surface of the ground, length alone would be of comparatively very small account without the peculiar formation and peculiar nerve equipment which distinguish the bill of the woodcock from the bill of, let us say again, the thrush. Were the bill of the thrush to be extended to the length of the woodcock's bill, while at the same time retaining its own formation and its own, in comparison, slightly developed sense of touch, the bird being at the same time given the instinct to probe for worms as the woodcock probes for them, it is much more than doubtful whether he would gain the slightest success from his probing. He would be able to turn over

decaying leaves to a greater depth and to reach snails in recesses where they remain unattainable now, but on the whole a bill as lengthy as the woodcock's bill would be more an encumbrance than a thing to be desired. Length alone in the bill of the woodcock is merely fundamental, though of course of the first necessity, for any decrease in length would mean a corresponding diminution in the exercise of the power of prehension and the sense of touch.

The second necessity for the perfect functioning of the organ is that it shall possess delicacy of sensation to such degree that it may immediately interpret to the brain of its owner between the feeling derived from the soft earth through which it is thrust and that yielded by coming into contact with any worm it may encounter during the thrust. This potentiality it has in the highest state of perfection, to the highest degree of utility. We are all aware how finely developed is the sense of touch in the tip of the forefinger of man. Yet it is altogether to be doubted whether if we probed with the forefinger in soil of sufficient softness wherein worms lay hidden, the most sensitive finger in creation could acquaint its possessor with the fact when it came into contact with a worm. But the bill of the woodcock is able to do this instantly and infallibly. If it were only as sensitive as man's

forefinger it would be an organ wanting in efficiency, and the bird would find himself severely handicapped in gaining his living.

This wonderful organ, the bill of the woodcock and his relatives, is one mass of nerves. If soaked in water for a few days the outer skin may be readily peeled off, and one may then see the nerve system laid bare to the eye. The nerve-cells, hexagonal, are arranged in raised lines. The cushion at the tip of the upper mandible is a nerve mass of the most extreme sensitiveness. No doubt this cushion, on account of its forward position, contains the nerves principally called into play as indicators of a worm's presence. The nerves on the upper mandible from the cushion towards the nostrils frequently detect a worm which the cushion has missed as soon as the bird twists its beak round in the earth—though it may be admitted that this is purely dogmatic: I do not know whether the woodcock has been noticed to do it when kept in confinement, or the snipe either, but the latter bird may be seen to carry out the proceeding in a wild state. This twisting round brings the more sensitive surface of the bill into contact with any worm which the less sensitive part, though it touched the worm, may have failed to discover.

The length of the bill of the woodcock, however,

and the marvellous nerve system with which it is effectively endowed, would not alone prove sufficient to enable the bird to do really good work among the subterranean quarry on which it subsists unless Nature had also studied the prehensile question. Special means of prehension were found to be an absolute necessity to thoroughly effective equipment. The sharp pointed and slightly curved tip of, once again, the thrush, so useful in enabling the bird to seize and retain his hold of any tiny portion of worm just showing above the surface, and to draw the worm from its hiding-place, would be practically useless for service under ground. Again, if the woodcock's mandibles had been of equal length, or practically of equal length, securing a worm two or three inches down in the soil would be a matter of considerable difficulty, would necessitate a very much more complicated course of action than that which the bird with his perfected organ finds it necessary to adopt.

The upper mandible of the woodcock's bill exceeds the lower by slightly more than one-tenth of an inch. Hence, when the bill comes into contact with a worm in the soil, the bird has only to ensure that the under surface of the extreme tip of the upper mandible touches the worm, and then to withdraw the lower mandible from the upper but the smallest

distance—and then, the under surface of the extreme tip of the upper mandible being kept pressed against the worm, a downward thrust is all that is necessary infallibly to drive the highly yielding body between the two mandibles as an eel is forced between the tines of an eel-spear. Once wedged between the mandibles, the worm—or perhaps very often only a portion of it—is easily drawn to the surface. The broad and raised tip of the upper mandible so far clears the way when forced into the ground, that the lower mandible encounters no resistance from the soil when withdrawn to the essential small extent prior to the thrust which secures the worm being given if the whole bill is turned slightly before the mandibles are opened ; and I fancy the bird always turns it to the necessary degree when probing in other than very wet or very loose soil.

Were there not this difference of length in the mandibles, were the mandibles of equal or almost equal length, the bird would have to put up with various inconveniences from which it is free with the bill in its present form. When the point of the bill touched a worm, the bill would have to be withdrawn till both mandibles were above the worm instead of the lower mandible only ; the lower mandible, not having had its passage cleared, it would be more

difficult to withdraw it from the upper mandible, even to the small extent now required ; before the thrust which forces the worm between the mandibles could be given, the bird would have to be sure that the inner surfaces of the tips of both mandibles were in contact with the worm, whereas all it has now to do with its natural worm-spear is to feel the worm with the inner surface of the tip of the upper mandible only ; the mandibles would have to be separated more widely than is now essential before the bird could feel that the inner surfaces of the tips of both mandibles were in contact with the worm. All this taking comparatively a long time, it is probable that many worms would be roused and change their position before the two mandibles could be brought to bear accurately, and would be lost. If we consider the very small space occupied by the part of the eel's body wedged between the tines of an eel-spear, and also consider how resistless to compression is a worm compared with an eel, and if we further consider how well the worm's exterior is lubricated, we can imagine how small an opening there need be for a worm to be forced between the tips of a woodcock's mandibles when the inner surface of the tip of the upper mandible is held in contact with the worm and a downward thrust is made.

Nature makes no attempt to do everything for her creatures. She works on the lines best adapted to the special needs of each. If she had developed man's front limbs into wings, instead of arms with hands on them, we should have been able to fly, but we should never have been lords of creation. Nature is always right. Her creatures at different stages create their own needs, but it is Nature who follows up the creation of those needs by creating means to satisfy them. When she finds that the creature has two needs, both of which she is unable to satisfy, she decides which is the more important and at once sets herself by age-long processes to provide means for satisfying this whilst ignoring the less important. As the means of satisfying the one are increased, so at the same time do the means of satisfying the other decrease. When she cannot give with the right hand without taking with the left, she takes with the left hand unsparingly. In which she is wise, as in everything. When man's remote ancestor abandoned a purely maritime life and became amphibious he had to sacrifice his gills—the openings of which man of to-day not so very infrequently shows at birth—in favour of lungs.

So it was with the bill of the woodcock, or with the bill of the common ancestor of the *Scolopacidae*.

Nature saw that the woodcock's need for extracting worms from beneath the surface was greater than the need for feeding above the surface, and saw at the same time that it was of greater importance to the bird to have a bill thoroughly adapted to underground work and ill adapted to surface work than one which would be a good tool above ground but only a moderate one below. Hence, as usual, she ignored the means to satisfy the lesser need and began to perfect, and eventually perfected, the means of satisfying the greater, the means of satisfying the former becoming less efficient as that of satisfying the latter became more efficient. As we have seen, while lengthening the woodcock's bill and endowing it with a sense of touch so delicate that it can be told in an instant when the surface comes into contact with a worm, she at the same time lengthened the upper mandible in excess of the lower in order that only the inner surface of the tip of the upper mandible need be brought in touch with the worm for the bird to 'take aim,' and in order that it might be certain that the worm would find itself forced between the mandibles when the bill was thrust downwards. But this excess of length of the upper mandible, so necessary to the woodcock when probing, takes away very largely from the efficiency of the bill when it is used above the surface.

The bird has the greatest difficulty in picking up a worm on the flat surface of the ground. This is one of the things chiefly noticed when the woodcock is kept in confinement. Let worms be given to it in a pot of earth, and it probes for them and secures them with unerring skill, but let a worm be placed on the ground, and it can only be gripped by the bill when it has been pushed along till some opposing object is encountered ; and even then it is seen that the bill is but a comparatively clumsy tool apart from its proper sphere of action. The attempts of a woodcock to pick up a worm from a flat surface are such as ours would be if we endeavoured to pick up the same worm with a pair of pliers the jaws of which were of unequal length.

Does the woodcock probe by rule of thumb, or is there any sense which tells him where a worm lies hidden in the ground ? This is a question which is, and has frequently been, discussed—after as well as before dinner. I have more often than not heard people favour the idea that by some means or another the bird knows there is a worm beneath a certain part of the surface before he probes the spot. If he does know, the difficulty is how does he know ? As far as we are able to judge by the criterion of our own senses, if the woodcock knows there is a worm

beneath a certain part of the surface before he probes, he must either hear the worm or must smell it. The Rev. J. G. Wood says :—‘ It is thought that the sense of smell enables the bird to discover worms beneath the surface.’ Many have thought after this manner, and no doubt many think so now. But there is no foundation for the belief—indeed, any really observant naturalist, even in Wood’s day, ought quite to have ridiculed the idea. The sense of smell in birds—I venture to write thus dogmatically as the result of the most, to myself, conclusive experiments—is so little developed that in many cases it may almost be said to be non-existent ; I have often found myself wondering whether it even exists at all, save as such a feeble sense that a man being only able to smell as a bird smells might say he had lost the power of smelling almost entirely.

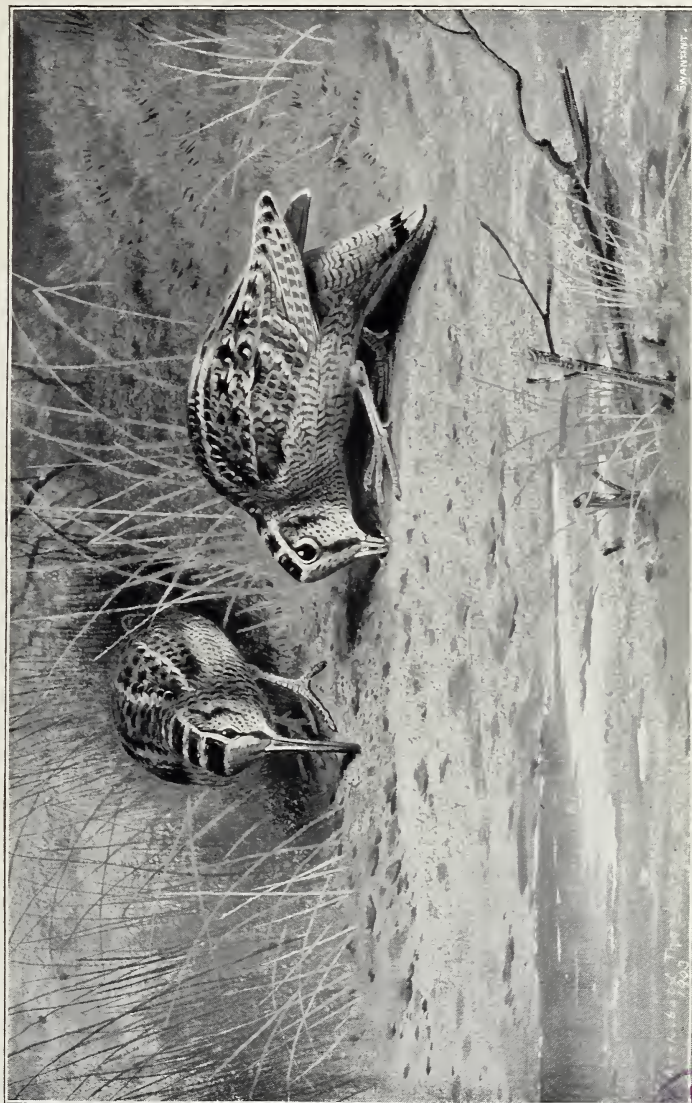
A pheasant, for instance, can smell tobacco smoke if very near its source, but though ravenous at the time and remarkably fond of chopped onions, cannot detect the presence of a piece of onion hidden by a leaf not two inches away from its nostrils, whereas if the same piece of onion were the same distance from the nostrils of a man, the man would find the smell of it unpleasantly strong. No British bird whose habits it is possible to study closely uses the sense of smell

either as a means of protecting itself from enemies or as a means of ascertaining the whereabouts of food hidden from the eye—and casting one's thoughts of various birds and their habits one finds it difficult to imagine how any of them would be really benefited in their search for food if their sense of smell were greater. The goose—a bird not very infrequently credited with the power of detecting the approach of an enemy down wind by the sense of smell—though, like the pheasant that has been instanced, ravenous at the time, cannot smell either its food or its feeder when, the feeder having approached silently, both of them are behind a hedge to the windward of the bird and no more than a few feet removed from it. Every bird calls sight and touch, and very occasionally hearing, alone into play when searching for food, and the immense majority of them sight only. Accustomed food, food met with every day, is picked up and swallowed unhesitatingly ; unaccustomed food is tested first by touch, its consistency being gauged by the tips of the mandibles, and then by taste, the end of the tongue being placed against it. The goose, perhaps the most cautious of all birds, will just touch unaccustomed food with the tip of its beak, then withdraw the beak as though it had come into contact with a hot coal, and will very likely do this half-a-

dozen times before venturing to taste. As sight and touch alone, with occasionally hearing, as in the case of the owl, are involved in the question of procuring food, so are sight and hearing alone involved in the question of guarding against danger. Smell has nothing whatever to do with either.

And as to the woodcock hearing the movements of its prey underground, as many have supposed. Whether it ever does hear the movements of a worm which has been disturbed by vibration one cannot say for certain. The bird has undoubtedly a most acute sense of hearing, possibly as acute as that of a dog, and it is quite possible that a terrier, motionless and listening intently, could hear the movement of a worm just beneath the surface.

Though it is likely enough that the woodcock keeps a sharp look-out in order to detect any movement of a worm which is made in response to the vibration caused by thrusting the bill into the ground, I think it may be safely assumed that the bird never listens for, if, indeed, it is ever able to hear, the movements of a worm ; and I am quite sure the sense of smell is never called into requisition. The probing is done purely by rule of thumb. The ground where the woodcock chooses to feed is always ground where worms exist in abundance, and the bird need never



HUNGRY WOODCOCK

SWANSON

MOSE
PUBLIC
LIBRARY

probe so very many times before that sensitive three-inches-long bill comes into contact with an unsuspecting worm. Under such circumstances smelling for or listening for a worm would be sheer waste of time. If the bird were able to hear or smell its prey the power of doing so would be quite superfluous.

Harking back for a moment to Nature in the matter of her work upon the woodcock. While she was lengthening the bird's bill and giving it its special form, and threading it with a network of nerves to complete its efficiency, she did not fail to consider another essential or convenience—viz. the position of the eyes that guide it. While extending the growth of the former in a forward direction, she shifted the position of the latter more and more to the rearward till their situation at last became further back in the head than that of the eyes of any other British bird. The position of the eyes lends almost as striking a peculiarity to the woodcock's head as does the lengthy bill itself. Nature's object in thus shifting the bird's eyes from the position occupied by the eyes of birds of other feeding habits was of course to enable the 'cock to probe to the full length of his bill on swampy land without bringing the eyes under the water or mud. To our friend the thrush the position

of the eyes is of no moment; to the woodcock, a forward position would be very inconvenient compared with their present position.

Like all his family, the woodcock is a prodigious feeder and has a prodigiously rapid digestion. He is a gourmand of the extreme type: the equivalent to his own weight in worms suffices for but a short time indeed. This large appetite and his powers of quick digestion enable him to put on flesh with surprising rapidity. When, after a delayed migration journey, woodcock reach us in the bag-of-bones state, or when a spell of sharp frost has reduced them to practically fleshless things, less than a week's uninterrupted supply of food will restore them to all their accustomed plumpness. The woodcock's digestive capabilities are a blessing to him on such occasions, but on other occasions are quite the reverse; for it is natural to assume that the more rapid the digestion the more quickly does enforced deprivation from food tell upon the bird's body. Wood-pigeons, for instance, though sometimes poor on their arrival, never reach our shores in the emaciated condition in which woodcock not infrequently appear, though their journeys must be subject to delays in the same way as are those of the 'cock. The woodcock, requiring a much greater proportionate bulk of food

than the large majority of birds, is one of the very first to feel privation and lose flesh.

As would be naturally assumed, the woodcock being a bird of the night, his powers of vision during daylight are inferior to those of birds who make the day hours their waking hours. Not so very rarely a 'cock roused in the daylight will dash into some obstacle and stun itself, or almost stun itself, by the act. Sometimes even the wielder of the gun himself is reported to have had a dazzled and terrified 'cock fly against him. The Rev. R. A. Julian says:—

This season one flew against my breast; and last year another was observed by a friend of mine to knock itself down against a house, and when he came to the spot it was perfectly dead. I have heard my father relate an incident of one flying against a marker, whom he had stationed in a tree, and striking him so severely on the cheek as to draw blood.

Artificial light has a potent attraction for the woodcock, as for so many other birds who find themselves abroad by night. Lighthouses often claim victims at the seasons of migration. On the evening of November 5, 1898, while the usual bonfire was blazing on the village green at Easington, Durham, a woodcock, his wits no doubt somewhat demoralised by the bonfire, dashed through a large square of glass in the dining-room—discerning bird—of the Manor House. The

force of the impact stunned but did not kill him. On October 22, 1900, about seven o'clock in the evening, a dead woodcock was picked up outside the Inner Temple Library. There is little doubt that this bird—it was in good condition—was making an inland journey and wandered within the radius of London's lights, and, losing its head amid such unusual surroundings, at last dashed against one of the illuminated faces of the Library clock.

The woodcock in confinement makes as interesting a pet as the snipe, quickly becoming tame and attaching itself to those with whom it is familiar, while showing marked suspicion and dislike of strangers. It has all the love of warmth shown by the snipe, and, like the latter bird, seems never so happy as when allowed to bask in the heat of the fire.

Cockshut time is the time when, dusk having fallen, woodcock take wing and hie them away for their nightly visit to the feeding ground. The term originated from the old practice of netting 'cock as they flew in the dim light down the glade or ride which led to the opening by which they were in the habit of leaving any particular wood. The falling of the net shut in the 'cock: hence the net used for taking the birds became known as a cockshut, and the time of using it as cockshut time.

English literature of a past age is rich in allusions to the woodcock and to the netting and snaring of the bird, as well as to its supposed stupidity. Shakespeare's references number nearly a dozen. For instance :—

Thomas the Earl of Surrey and himself
Much about cockshut time went through the army.

Again: 'Springes to catch woodcocks!' is used to express Polonius' opinion of Hamlet's protestations of love when the latter were enlarged upon by Ophelia. Shakespeare also alludes to the then current belief in the bird's simplicity or stupidity :—

Oh this woodcock, what an ass it is !

Beaumont and Fletcher refer to the snaring of 'cock in the words :—

When you come next a-birding,
I'll have a stronger noose to hold a woodcock.

As a final quotation, I give Ben Jonson's lines :—

Mistress, this is only spite—
For you would not yesternight
Kiss him in the cockshut light.

The netting of woodcock at cockshut time was popular as a sport long ago besides being a means of bringing grist to the poacher's mill. No doubt it was

practised for many years after the shot-gun came into general use, for old forms of sport die hard. Probably the poacher continued it till the systematic preservation of game rendered the proceeding too risky to be worth carrying out. The arrangements for netting 'cock were simple. A net of requisite length and breadth was suspended across the glade or opening used by the birds when leaving the covert. I have never come across a clear description of the manner in which the net was kept in position. Whatever the method may have been, and several occur to one, it was effective. The moment the bird struck the net, the fowler, crouching in the undergrowth or hidden by an artificial screen, released or pulled the line he held, the result being that the net dropped and the 'cock found itself a captive. Very large numbers of woodcock used to be netted in this manner in various parts of the kingdom, more particularly, from what one gleans, in Wales and the West of England. A century or so ago the South Wales coaches used regularly during the season to take heavy baskets of netted and snared cock each time they made the journey to London.

As the woodcock's habit of leaving the wood at dusk by a certain exit led to his very considerable undoing at the hands of the hanger of nets, so did his

further habit of never, when feeding, flying over any obstacle if he can walk round it or through it lend itself to his large suffering by the machinations of the setter of springes. The way in which the snarer went to work was to ascertain, by observation, the feeding ground used by woodcock, and then to throw up a ridge of earth or build a low hedge across it, leaving at intervals of so many yards small openings or gaps just allowing room for a bird to pass through. In each of these gaps or openings a horse-hair noose was set at the right height from the ground. On coming to the hedge or ridge, a woodcock, according to its habit, instead of flying over, walked along the side till it reached the first opening, and attempting to pass through, it was almost inevitably made a captive. Where woodcock were plentiful, the results must have amply repaid the trouble of erecting the ridge or hedge and keeping it patched up year after year. Possibly this plan is still in vogue on a small scale in some of the wilder parts of the kingdom, but the modern poacher, in England at least, would have small chance of pursuing a system that entailed the construction of so conspicuous an object as an artificial ridge or a low hedge across the marshland.

The poacher of to-day who turns his attention to 'cock accounts for a certain number of birds by

setting small circular gins at the margins of pools, streams, and ditches, visited by his quarry. The holes left by the woodcock's beak tell an unmistakable tale to whomsoever uses his observations of bird life as a means of providing himself with an augmentation of pocket money during the winter months, and the setting of a gin is a simple and speedy operation. If a woodcock be in the habit of visiting a certain pool, and a gin be set so that it is just covered by the water, the bird's fate is almost assuredly sealed the first night. Only in Ireland has the poacher now a chance of systematically using the gun on woodcock. Scotch poachers seem to have had a good time among 'cock many years ago. Sir Walter Scott wrote in 1826 :—

I have been out for two or three days endeavouring to obtain a shot or two at woodcock, but I have not been successful. The fact is these birds are now taken off wholesale by a band of men who do nothing else for the season but kill them, and they find a ready and profitable market for them in all our large and populous Scottish cities and towns. I was lately informed by one poulterer in Edinburgh that he had paid one man nearly one hundred pounds last season for woodcocks, which he had chiefly shot in the western part of Argyllshire and Inverness-shire.

Among the priceless art treasures—pictures innumerable by Van Dyke, by Raphael, by Gainsborough, and their peers; statuary unique, and of

enormous value ; manuscripts, the like of which the British Museum cannot show—which adorn the interior of Holkham Hall, the seat of the Earl of Leicester, K.G., not the least beautiful and interesting is the monumental sculpture of Chantrey's woodcocks, which stands at the south end of the Long Library. Saying that the sculpture is by Chantrey's hand is equivalent to saying that the work is in the very highest sense artistically perfect. The vignette on the title-page of this book, reproduced by the kind permission of the Earl of Leicester, is from a photograph, especially taken for the purpose by A. E. Coe, Norwich. The superscription on the monument runs :—

TWO WOODCOCKS
KILLED AT HOLKHAM
NOV^R. 1830
BY FRANCIS CHANTREY, SCULPTOR
AT ONE SHOT
PRESENTED TO THO^S. W^M. COKE, ESQUIRE 1834. ✓

Lord Leicester subsequently had a medallion of Sir Francis Chantrey added to the base of the monument, together with the dates of the sculptor's birth and death.

Killing two woodcock with one barrel is the

rarest of rare events. Probably all the game books in England would not yield records of half a dozen cases in which the feat has been performed. One other instance only is known to me—that of Colonel Sands, who killed his two 'cock with one shot on November 4, 1853. As Chantrey fired he dropped his gun—onlookers thinking that the weapon had burst or that the shooter had shot himself—and, rushing frantically up to a fellow gunner, exclaimed: 'I have killed two woodcocks at one shot!' Well might his excitement have been great. Mr. Coke thought the feat so meritorious that on the spur of the moment he marshalled all the guns, keepers, and beaters in line, and then made Chantrey pass along the rank, everyone having to uncover as the hero reached him. The part of the estate where the birds were killed has since been known as Chantrey Hills.

In the Long Library at Holkham Hall is a book entitled 'Winged Words on Chantrey's Woodcocks.' Therein many versifiers—in both Greek and Latin as well as in our native tongue—have sung anent Chantrey and his immortal birds. Lord Leicester kindly gives me leave to quote from the volume. The gem of the collection is by the then Bishop of Oxford:—

Life in death, a mystic lot,
Dealt thou to the wingèd band :—
Death,—from thine unerring shot,
Life,—from thine undying hand.

The same sentiment runs through most of the matter which has been contributed to the volume. The following is by 'J. P. M.' :—

The hand of Chantrey by a single blow
At once laid these united woodcocks low ;
But the same hand, (its double skill so great),
By single blow their life did re-create,
No more henceforth to dread the stroke of Fate.

Again :—

Swift fire destroyed, sharp steel restored their lives.
Rare shot ! Not hapless who, thus slain, revives !
One death to both, one life from death again,
By one skilled hand bestowed upon the slain.
They slumber—but how lightly ! Passer by,
Be still, lest thou awake them, and they fly !

And once again :

One shot of Chantrey shew'd his power
By which he killed the twain ;
He proved it in a happier hour,
And gave them life again.

This is good :—

He hit the birds : and with an aim as true
And hand as skilful, hit their likeness too !

And this :—

With gun; or chisel, thou art doubly clever :
Chantrey ! Thy twins in death are twins for ever.

The following is distinctly epigrammatic :—

The 'cocks are two :—the shot was one :
Chantrey had double-cocked his gun.

And the following :—

Chantrey invented the best of gun locks,
Which cocks one hammer, and hammers two 'cocks.

This is above the average :—

From Chantrey's gun at one dread shot
Two woodcocks here were slain,
But Chantrey's chisel mourned their lot
And bade them live again.
What sportsman would not gladly find
His own for Chantrey's name ?
What woodcock would not die resign'd
To earn such deathless fame ?

I will conclude this list of quotations with the
lines of Mr. Spencer Stanhope :—

Two woodcocks fall at his one shot,
The joyous Chantrey smiled to see ;
Then pitying their untimely lot,
He gave them immortality.

SHOOTING THE WOODCOCK

BY

L. H. DE VISME SHAW

WOODCOCK SHOOTING IN GENERAL

THE gun best calculated to serve our needs when engaged in bringing the woodcock to bag is the same as that which we have found to be the best weapon for our equipment while walking after snipe, viz. a 12-bore of ordinary weight with a cylinder right barrel and the left barrel a full choke. It is with extreme frequency that shots at 'cock are only to be had at very short range or very long range. In the former case, a right barrel which does not throw an open pattern not only handicaps the shooter in his chances of killing the bird, but also damages the bird badly if it happens to be hit; in the latter case, unless a close shooting barrel is at command, the 'cock may often wholly escape the pellets which whiz around him. Walking through the covert, unless a shot be taken at close quarters the gunner will often, very often, find that the opportunity once missed does not come again, that the first twist of Master Rusticola takes him behind some tree or bush which he manages to

keep just in a line between himself and his would-be slayer till well out of range of the closest shooting barrel ever bored ; and if such a shot is taken with a close shooting barrel and the bird falls, the reflections of the cook whose lot it is to prepare it will be mixed and many.

Most people advocate the use of a gun with two cylinders or very slightly choked barrels when woodcock shooting in covert. The question is a pretty open one, depending to a great extent upon the character of the particular covert. Where the growth is young and close, the balance of advantage probably lies with such a gun. But, talking of woodcock shooting in general and taking one class of covert with another, the lack of command of a well choked left is over and over again a drawback of large degree. The crossing bird, flushed by another gun, which offers a long shot through a twenty-yards' break in the tree tops, may be nicely within range of a full choke and well beyond the certain range of a cylinder. Outside the covert, when the birds are being driven, a full choke left is everything. Here the majority of the shots we have are almost certain to be long shots, shots quite beyond the capabilities, except by a fluke, of the cylinder barrel. We cannot afford to pick our shots and fire at nothing over forty yards or so when

woodcock shooting as we can when the beaters are putting clouds of pheasants over us at every drive. For woodcock shooting in general, then, let the gun be a 12-bore with the right barrel or cylinder and the left a full choke. Not a few of those able to afford a battery keep a gun with short barrels for covert work on 'cock—or on anything else. Such a gun can be recommended in thick underwood provided that it balances and handles perfectly, a respect in which so many guns fail when length of barrel has been sacrificed.

No doubt a large majority of the woodcock bagged in England, Scotland, and Wales are killed with No. 6 shot or a larger size, for the reason that, the birds as a rule coming to the bag in small numbers, those who bag them are prepared only with that size of shot which they consider to act best on game in general. But for woodcock shooting proper such shot is unnecessarily heavy and gives too open a pattern: a woodcock falls to a very much slighter impact than a pheasant and presents a very much smaller target. No. 7 shot is usually, and rightly, regarded as by far the most satisfactory size to use on woodcock, while it is not too light for other game that may offer shots at moderate range, whereas No. 8 is too light. The pattern of No. 7 is dense enough for 'cock; the

penetration is sufficient. Not a few Irish sportsmen use No. 8 for woodcock shooting, and there is no doubt that up to a moderate range the shot acts well. Still, as the pattern of No. 7 is dense enough up to that range at which No. 8 will kill clean, and at short range damages the bird with fewer pellets, there can be no argument in favour of using the smaller shot instead of the larger. At anything over very moderate range, No. 8 is as uncertain in its effects upon woodcock as is No. 9 in its effects on snipe. In the case of both birds the gunner who is a sportsman should make it his aim to kill game clean at fair ranges, and if he uses anything smaller than No. 7 for woodcock and No. 8 for snipe a large number of his kills at fair range will not be clean kills.

Just as it is said over and over again that the slightest blow will bring down a snipe, so it is said over and over again that the slightest blow is enough for a woodcock. That a woodcock will fall to less shot than most birds of its weight is doubtless true, but the 'slightest blow' idea is quite erroneous. A woodcock struck in a non-vital part with a No. 7 pellet will no more think of curling up on the spot than will a mallard think of doing so when struck in the same part with a No. 4 pellet. Considering the ranges at which woodcock are shot at, I think it is

quite probable that the proportion of wounded birds which escape, or which rise again after having pitched, may be greater among 'cock than among any other game bird. Our fathers and grandfathers before us used to shoot at woodcock at double the range at which they would have thought of firing at a partridge. Most of us do the same thing to-day. Plenty of 'cock have a charge sent after them at a hundred yards or more, while certain birds have the satisfaction, or otherwise, of being 'saluted' at something like double the distance.

Haphazard shooting of this kind can have but one result, whether the bird shot at be the partridge or the woodcock—that, while the large majority of the birds are untouched, now and again a prodigiously long shot succeeds. When a woodcock is occasionally killed or stopped at seventy-five or eighty yards, one generally hears from some quarter or another, 'A 'cock is never out of shot'; or 'The slightest blow will bring down a 'cock.' But then a woodcock, wildfowl apart, is the only bird we think of shooting at at such a range. What is condoned by custom in the case of the woodcock would be very quickly condemned in the case of the partridge or the pheasant. One can vividly imagine the sentiments, expressed or unexpressed, of a host

and his head keeper if a guest, after being congratulated on stopping a woodcock at, well, say sixty-five yards, began blazing away at pheasants at the same range. If not the host's, the keeper's sentiments would probably find verbal expression.

If it were the custom to blaze away at partridges at the extreme ranges that are common when 'cock are in question, a certain proportion of phenomenal kills would ensue : saying that the partridges throughout England outnumber the woodcock throughout England by 250 to one ; then if 10 per cent. of the partridges, as well as 10 per cent. of the woodcock, were shot at at ranges of between sixty-five and seventy-five yards, while all the 10 per cent. of woodcock were bagged, only one quarter of the 10 per cent. of partridges were killed, then to every one woodcock stopped at between sixty-five and seventy-five yards there would be no fewer than sixty odd partridges stopped at the same distance. The sight of a woodcock dropped at such a range would then never excite comment—the 'cock's reputation for excessive vulnerability would be gone for ever.

And how did the origin of the practice of shooting at 'cock at such extreme ranges come about ? I think it arose in this way :

The flint-lock generation had to find out for

themselves the capabilities of their guns. Naturally they would try all sorts of shots at all sorts of ranges—often, no doubt, at quite impossible ranges. Let us say they attempted to kill partridges, pheasants, and woodcock at between eighty and ninety yards. If they ever did manage, by some fluke of flukes, to stop a wood-pigeon or a pheasant or a partridge at such a range they could only have done so with the greatest infrequency, such infrequency that they would soon have come to look upon shooting of the kind as sheer waste of powder, shot, and time. Every bird, or every bird save the very occasional victim of a stray pellet that happened to tip a wing or touch a skull, would continue its flight in such a manner as to demonstrate that the charge had had no effect upon it.

But what of woodcock when fired at at the same range? In one of its ways when under fire the 'cock differs materially from the pheasant, the partridge, and the wood-pigeon. It happens repeatedly that when a woodcock is fired at and not touched it will drop its flight as the shot whistles round it, or immediately afterwards, will fly a short distance, and will then either alight or, more frequently, skim away unobserved only a few feet from the ground. This it will do whether the range be forty yards or ninety yards. By those not intimately acquainted with the peculiarities

of woodcock, it is seldom doubted that a bird going through this performance is hard hit—and it is often quite impossible to convince someone who has only an occasional shot at a 'cock that it is simple waste of time and energy to go on looking for his supposed dead bird, for he is prepared to swear that it was so badly wounded it could never rise again.

The flint-lock generation were deceived just in the same way in which a modern sportsman who does not have much to do with woodcock is deceived. While they found it quite useless to fire at pheasants or partridges or wood-pigeons at eighty yards or so, because these birds never showed any sign of being affected by the shot, they discovered that 'cock fired at at the same distance frequently dropped, as they thought, hard hit. So they went on firing at woodcock at double the range at which they would fire at wood-pigeons or partridges or pheasants. Continuing to do this systematically, they succeeded in really wounding and bagging a certain small proportion of the birds shot at—just as they would have wounded and bagged a certain small proportion if the birds had been partridges instead of woodcock—and it came to be believed by them that the penetrability of a 'cock was, not quite that of a jelly-fish, but still something vastly different from that of the pheasant, the partridge, or

the wood-pigeon. This belief was handed down and adhered to by the flint-lock generation's successors, adhered to because these successors found it quite true that when they shot at 'cock at very long ranges the birds often went down, apparently wounded, while now and again one of them, really hit, was brought to bag: and the flint-lock generation's successors handed it on to ourselves. That so many of those supposed hard-hit birds were never found was no doubt accounted for by crediting wounded woodcock with a quite extraordinary aptitude for hiding themselves. They are very often credited with such an aptitude in our own day. I have more than once heard it agreed by all present who expressed an opinion that the mysterious disappearance of a supposed hard-hit bird was explained by the proximity of a rabbit burrow, up one of the holes of which the 'cock was assumed to have fled. As a matter of fact a wounded woodcock has not one solitary notion of hiding itself. Its only notion, if both legs are sound, is to work away from its wounder. I suppose we shall always go on shooting at 'cock at ranges at which we never think of pulling a trigger at other game, I suppose the belief that the 'cock is a very much more vulnerable subject than it really is will always linger, and I feel very sure that

the younger generations of gunners will always continue in the faith that woodcock which have ducked to their charges are dead or badly wounded birds.

The first 'cock—who does not remember his first woodcock?—I, a mere slip of a boy at the time, ever shot or ever shot at was a long shot. The range was stepped out as seventy yards. The bird, struck by a No. 5 pellet, fell stone dead. I preferred an eager request that it might become my own, for stuffing, but it disappeared into the pocket of a velveteen coat and I never saw it again.

It is both true and untrue, according to conditions, that the woodcock is one of the most difficult of all birds to hit. A 'cock twisting among the trees in a covert often of course offers as difficult a shot as it is possible to imagine; a 'cock when its flight is erratic outside the covert of course frequently offers a difficult shot too. The latter bird if within fair range is, I think, generally missed through being fired at too soon—but then most of us consider that all is fair in love, war, and 'cock shooting, and the briefest of brief pauses may mean that the bird will go to someone else's credit. A woodcock flushed in the open, however, or from low scrub generally, one might perhaps say nearly always, affords an easy enough shot, a shot

certainly very much easier than that usually offered by a snipe. It is noted in the 'Badminton Library' :

If woodcock lie well and there are plenty of them—a rare combination—the percentage of birds bagged is quite as large as it is with any of our winged game. We have constantly remarked this, and noted the success which attends an ordinary good shot when woodcock-shooting, if the birds are fairly abundant and not wild.

In my own opinion, there is no doubt that the old-standing practice of shooting at 'cock at long ranges has given the woodcock its reputation for being a more difficult bird to hit than it really is, for its reputation in this respect is certainly an exaggerated one among those who only have the opportunity of killing an odd 'cock or two by the covert-side or within the covert. In England a large proportion of the shots we have at woodcock are long shots, and in addition to this, we are seldom ready with shot of any smaller size than No. 6—perhaps there are a good many more cock fired at during the English covert beating season with No. 6½ and No. 5 than with No. 6—and a woodcock has plenty of chances of clearing the pellets of a charge of No. 6, No. 6½, or No. 5 at not a very lengthy range.

A woodcock flushed before the gunner should be fired at the very first moment it offers a steady shot.

If missed with the first barrel, and the bird should then be twisting, let the second charge be put in immediately after a swerve. It should always be borne in mind that a woodcock generally gives a more easy shot just as it rises than at any time afterwards. 'Cock rising before the gunner in covert are very frequently missed through want of elevation. Outside the covert, if time allow, one cannot well shoot too steadily. When a bird is swerving, shoot the moment after a swerve.

The most striking instance of a woodcock being missed outside the covert that has ever come under my notice occurred several years ago at Shouldham, Norfolk, on the property of the late Doctor Allen. There were either four or five guns, I do not remember which. My father was one of the end guns. A woodcock came straight at the gun next to my father and had a right and left put at it by this gun, and then, swerving abruptly, ran the gauntlet of the line of guns, receiving two barrels from each of them without apparently being touched. After flying a short distance, the bird, which had become pretty tall by then, turned back towards the guns and again passed over the line, every man emptying both barrels at it with the exception of my father, who killed it with his first barrel, this shot being either the

thirteenth or the seventeenth shot fired at the bird. No doubt the bird was wounded while passing over the guns the first time, probably by the man who shot at it first. One should add that the guns were not a party of duffers or anything like it, but well known local sportsmen who could hold their own with most people.

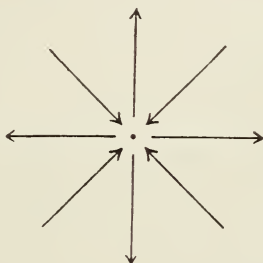
A peculiarity of the woodcock is its reluctance to leave the covert it has adopted as a temporary home. Besides those birds which break back, and very likely drop again not 150 yards behind the line of beaters, a large proportion of the birds that have been missed or have failed to come within range, will, after flying a longer or shorter distance, lower their flight and flit back unobserved to the covert whence they were ejected. On account of this, a covert should always be gone through a second time when there are 'cock about. Better results are likely to be yielded if the birds be allowed an hour or two's rest before being again put on the wing than if the covert be taken at once; but in the circumstances under which we mostly have to kill 'cock in England, that is in conjunction with pheasants, such a course of action is usually out of the question.

When woodcock are known to be in the locality, or when it is expected that they will be found.

markers should be stationed at commanding points a fair distance from the covert, and any birds that have been marked down should be looked for directly the beaters again appear in the open. 'Cock, on account of their incurable vice of so often skimming away near the ground after they have dropped their flight as though they meant to settle, are very difficult to mark down accurately : a marker may be prepared to swear that a 'cock pitched in a certain coppice, whereas the bird, momentarily lost to sight by the marker or hidden from his view by some interjacent growth, flew half a mile or a mile further on before lighting. On account of this uncertainty in marking, it is never worth while wasting time over a bird that cannot be found close to where it was supposed to have gone down—it is better to assume at once that it never settled there at all.

When following up a 'cock which has been marked down in negotiable cover, or in any situation allowing the proceeding, it is an excellent and time-saving plan for three or more guns to station themselves—the further guns working round at a safe distance from the spot where the marker says the bird pitched—at equal distances from one another, and a few hundred yards from the spot, and then to approach the spot simultaneously and

quietly. If the bird rises wild, as it most likely will, before one of the converging guns or beaters—preferably, there should be beaters equal in number to the guns—it is likely to give a chance to one of the other guns, whereas, if it rose wild before a line, it would give a chance to none. Should the bird not rise before the in-drawing guns reach the spot where it was marked down, let them retrace their steps midway between the lines taken on their approach. A diagram will make quite clear a manœuvre rather difficult to describe in words. Thus :



If this plan be systematically followed, many a bird will be brought to bag which would be lost if walked up in line, or if driven: if two or more 'cock are marked down, and the guns divide into equal parties and follow up the birds immediately,

the time lost is not considerable, while the results, as a rule, amply compensate.

If a woodcock which has been marked down in an open situation is not followed up at once, it is not much use looking for it later on. The bird is extremely likely to change its quarters, probably working back to the covert whence it originally rose. When looked for immediately, a 'cock is more often found rather beyond the spot where it was seen to pitch than in the spot itself.

When woodcock are in evidence, beaters who know their business will beat out evergreens in the covert almost to the last twig. After a light night, a bird under the low boughs of a holly will often almost want kicking up.

Thus far the 'cock, as we meet with him—would that we might meet with him more frequently!—when covert-beating. We will now consider woodcock shooting when 'cock are the special object of our endeavours.

On every manor where woodcock appear from time to time in fair numbers, there are always certain spots in which, except under special conditions of weather, birds are very much more likely to be found than in other parts of the shoot. These spots are occasionally subject to sudden

desertion by the birds: a certain spot which was always a sure find for 'cock, when there were birds in the district, up till a few years ago, they may now strictly avoid. Why this should be the case it is quite impossible to say. We might find a plausible reason if the birds were constant residents on the manor, or if they fed in the spot wherein they once had been regularly found. But 'cock come from here, there, and everywhere, and food has nothing to do with their partiality for one covert on an estate and their dislike of another. Why, therefore, the birds should avoid, and permanently avoid, a spot to which they had previously shown unswerving attachment must remain a mystery.

Any kind of evergreen possesses irresistible attractions for woodcock, holly being their especial favourite. On account of its greater warmth, the southern side of a hill, conditions of cover being equal, will almost invariably harbour a larger proportion of 'cock than the northern side. A bank of scrub facing south is a favourite resting place for woodcock in open weather.

Directly hard frost sets in, woodcock desert their more exposed quarters and will be found by day in any spots which afford a combination of warmth and cover, such as the hollows or ditches of covert, copse,

or wood. This, as we have seen in a previous chapter, is for the main part because, the birds being driven to feed by day, spots least affected by frost yield the most readily accessible food, and only for the lesser part on account of warmth itself. For a gun, or two or three guns, specially seeking 'cock, there is no time so favourable to the chances of making a good bag as the first two days of really severe frost; for what birds happen to be on the shoot at the time are certain to be found concentrated in the least affected spots, in the hollows and ditches and so forth.

When out after woodcock, all the most likely places should, as in snipe-shooting, be gone through as early in the day as possible, the rest of the ground being afterwards worked systematically. A 'cock flushed from some favourite haunt and missed, or a bird that has risen wild, will often return to the same place and give another chance to the gun later in the day; while birds which have escaped when flushed from the less favoured parts of the ground are more likely to pitch in the more favoured parts than elsewhere, and should they pitch in these spots, which have been gone through early in the day, they will also give another chance when the places are again tried towards the day's close. Movements should be so

arranged that ample time is left before dusk to go over for a second time all the favourite haunts which were gone through at the beginning of the day.

In more open country, woodcock may be satisfactorily dealt with by the aid of well-broken spaniels, but where there is cover of any height, any dog but a retriever is always a failure to a greater or less extent—generally to a greater. 'Cock have a way of slipping off when flushed by a dog without giving the gun half a chance of a shot, and very often without giving him even a glimpse of them. Taking covert, copse, and scrub together, two or three boys are worth all the spaniels in creation. Under certain circumstances, setters are of service, but for woodcock shooting in general they are worse than useless.

The mood in which woodcock will be found depends, as with snipe, upon the lightness or darkness of the previous night, or upon whether or no there was frost enough to freeze the surface of their feeding grounds; on one day, having fed well the night before, they will be sluggish and will lie close, whilst on another day, having been unable to feed heavily during the night, they will be restless and will lie badly. This rule holds good to the extent of ninety or ninety-five per cent. As forewarned is forearmed, the gunner should always bear this in mind and

regulate his methods by the degree of light or frost of the previous night. For instance, on a day following a light night, when chances are greatly in favour of the birds lying well, it is better to walk a certain covert in line, whereas on a day following a dark night, when the chances are greatly in favour of the birds lying badly, it is better to have the same certain covert beaten towards the guns.

When beating a covert for woodcock, there should if possible always be an outside gun on either side of the line of beaters and some short distance in advance, the principal function of these guns being to command the ends of any ride, or any well-defined opening at the side of the wood. 'Cock will very frequently turn abruptly and leave the covert at such places: even when well above the tree-tops, they will turn in the same manner and follow the line of a ride. Over and over again it is the outside guns a little in advance of the beaters who secure the lion's share of, or perhaps all of, the shooting.

It is well to bear in mind that for a few weeks after their arrival, till the leaf is off and colder weather has set in, woodcock are to be found in what later on in the season, when they seek more substantial shelter, would be the most unlikely places. Any hedgerow, any patch of bramble or gorse, may hold a recently

arrived 'cock, and by trying all such cover quite a respectable bag may sometimes be picked up. When a single woodcock is seen early in the season—or indeed at any other time—it should always be assumed that others are in the vicinity, and the assumption usually proves to be well founded. Let it be acted on immediately: a good little day may be had without disturbing a yard of the coverts. Woodcock are like time and tide, in that they wait for no man. While a potter round on one day would have brought eight or ten couple of 'cock to the bag, the following day may disclose the fact that every bird has left the district.

Just a word on the question of following a woodcock that has been marked down when the gun is alone or has only a companion or two. If one walks straight at the bird, it is more likely than not to rise wild. When by one's self, a wide *détour* should be made, and the bird approached from the opposite direction. Even a bird which has risen very wild when flushed the first time will often give a good shot when the gunner works round in this manner. A 'cock which has pitched within a few hundred yards of the point at which it was flushed will generally edge away from that point, sometimes very quickly. The moral of this is that the gunner should make such a

détour as will bring him well beyond the spot whereon the bird has alighted, and that his movements should be as speedy as possible. No doubt the reason why a woodcock will lie better when a *détour* is made is that, whether it has been shot at or not, it keeps its attention fixed for some time upon the direction from which the gunner would come if he followed straight on, expects him so to follow, and when it becomes aware that someone is approaching from the opposite direction it imagines itself to be between two fires, loses its head, and squats till too late for its own safety. Never fail to deal with a 'cock that has been marked down for the first time the moment it has settled; never fail to approach it as quietly as possible. When put up for the second time and again marked down—the gunner being by himself—it is better to leave the bird alone then and to try for it later in the day; for if one follows on at once, it will almost certainly rise quite out of shot and is very likely to disappear for good and all. If you have a companion, when a woodcock has been marked down near at hand let your companion keep up a continuous rattling or whistling while you make a *détour* and walk up the bird towards him: when a bird has been marked down at a distance, let one gun walk quickly to within five or six gunshots of the spot and remain

there whistling or rattling while the other gun, having made his *détour*, walks up the bird.

The local movements of woodcock—movements, that is, within our own shores—are subject to no known law: the birds move from one locality to another, but no one can say exactly why they do so. If anything in the nature of a law is to be discerned it is that 'cock seem to move more freely in heavy, misty weather than in bright or windy weather. In writing the foregoing, I have not considered frost in connection with the question of law. Frost will cause birds scattered over high bleak country to seek warmer quarters in lower and more sheltered country, there being then a concentration of their numbers in the warmest parts of the warmer district. But not always: only as a general rule. Heavy gales will cause the same effect—but here again not always, only as a general rule. Though, frost and gales apart, we find no shred of a law governing the movements of woodcock from a general point of view, we are able to find more or less of law in the attractions of pure locality for the birds under certain and widely varying conditions of weather and temperature. It is not in any way to be taken as a law proper, but merely as something certainly worth going upon in every small district. If in any given small

district 'cock suddenly appear, let careful note be made of the weather at the time, and of the weather of the past few days. It may be that the 'cock have appeared on a good west wind following a week of still settled weather with a mere breeze from the south ; it may be that they have appeared with still, frosty weather following a spell of south wind. Whatever the weather at the time and the weather of a few days before may have been, 'cock are more likely to appear again in that district under similar meteorological conditions, and a sharp look out for them should then be kept. Local observation in this matter is worth more than all the generalities that have ever been written as to when and why woodcock may be expected. Generalities are good as generalities only, but local notes serve a local sportsman in very much better part.

The record bag of woodcock, I believe, is that already mentioned as having been made by Lord Ardilaun in January 1895, when a party of eight guns killed 508 'cock in one day. From these same coverts 106 'cock were killed in one day in 1878 ; in 1879 two days yielded bags of 117 and 115 birds respectively ; in 1880 a head of 165 was bagged in one day, while in 1899 a day's bag amounted to 168 head. These, of course, are highly exceptional

figures, even for Ireland. A century ago, in County Cavan, Lord Clermont killed 102 'cock to his own gun, a flint-lock, in a single day. This was done for a wager—a wager of three hundred guineas that he would account for fifty couple of woodcock between dawn and dark. He began the first thing in the morning, and by breakfast time had only killed a few birds and missed many ; but, making a fresh start after breakfast, succeeded in bagging one couple more than the stipulated number by between two and three o'clock in the afternoon. He picked his day for the test, this being agreed upon when the bet was made. The islands on the west coast of Scotland afford splendid woodcock shooting from time to time. In Raasay, an island lying between Skye and the Scottish coast, two guns killed over 900 head in the season 1885-6. Good bags are made in Wales. Norfolk is the best English county for woodcock, and Melton Constable—though Holkham, Sandringham and Sheringham run it very close—is the best 'cock manor in the county. Over fifty couple of 'cock have been killed in the day at Melton Constable.

SNIFE AND WOODCOCK IN IRELAND

BY

RICHARD J. USSHER

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SNIPE AND WOODCOCK IN IRELAND

THE same causes that make Ireland the favourite haunt of the woodcock have marked out this land as the special home of the snipe. In parts of the country which abound in rushes and have wet catchment-basins hours of walking may not exhaust the grounds where snipe are to be found. Of these resorts there are more or less in every county, the mountainous parts being prolific in upland bogs, and the central plain having its vast extents of turf-bog as well as its numerous lakes. These are sometimes united by river systems like those of the Shannon and the Erne, which afford many a league of marshy meadows along their shores; but it is in western counties—Kerry, Galway, Mayo, and Donegal—that the great unreclaimed wilds of Ireland are to be found.

It is not, however, the largest tracts of bog that afford the best snipe shooting; extensive deposits of peat are not prolific in life of any sort, but all

along the western coast of Clare, and in parts of Kerry and other counties, there are great tracts of soft, green fields which provide these birds with endless feeding grounds.

In many parts of Ireland the population is small and too often diminishing, and in proportion as a locality is suitable for snipe it is little frequented in the wet season, except by the occasional cow-herd and the wandering sportsman.

If the latter be a hardy, active walker, and a ready snipe shot, the vast, lonely country before him, replete with this wild game, offers a boundless field for his energy. He speeds forward, despising mire and wet, as one agile bird after another springs aloft only to fall before his steady aim, and the discomforts of the ground and of the season are lost in the sense that he is invading the haunts of the shy, wild creatures of the marshland. He should be well repaid one day with another, for snipe are so numerous and widespread in the country that one can almost always look them up. But to be a successful snipe shooter one must not only be a good walker and a ready shot, but must have that hunting instinct which enables the sportsman to find his game during the various changes of the moon, of the season, and of the weather. This instinct is being

lost where pheasants and partridges are driven by a host of beaters to the guns, and where the shooter never has to find his birds.

Snipe frequent Ireland in enormous numbers still, notwithstanding the losses that have resulted in their ranks since quick-firing breech-loaders were introduced. But in this case things are far from that extreme phase upon which the history of the quail has entered, a bird which has been decimated by constant netting in Mediterranean countries.

In their habits of migration and feeding the woodcock and the snipe have much in common. Of the latter there are also two sets or races—those which come in autumn from northern regions to winter here, and those other snipe which breed more or less extensively in every Irish county. Of the former a very few make their appearance in the end of September, and an increasing number in October ; but as a rule few are seen before November and December, which are the chief months of their arrival, but the variations of weather and temperature produce much fluctuation ; thus a hard winter will drive unwonted numbers over to Ireland, and onward to its western shores and islands. The reports published by Mr. Barrington, collected from lighthouse observations, show that the winter snipes arrive

in the greatest numbers on the north coast, and rapidly reach the West of Connaught and Kerry ; but many come by way of the Copeland Islands off Co. Down, evidently passing down the North Channel. Western Ireland is, however, the chief destination, as well as the ultimate refuge when other parts of the country are under snow. Some snipe not only betake themselves to the marine islands, like Rathlin O'Birne, off Western Donegal, but they winter there, and numbers breed on Rathlin Island, off Antrim.

Not only does the winter season thus bring with it an immigration that extends over the whole island, but when the winter visitors have gone every part of Ireland has its breeding grounds of snipe, and the numbers that nest regularly in quiet swamps and rushy fields are remarkable.

Many young and old birds are to be seen in their haunts in August, and they admit of nearer approach at that time than later in the season. Thompson thought that the snipe which sometimes appeared in numbers in August soon afterwards departed.

Mr. Wise remarks :—

I have a strong opinion that the home bred birds leave the South of Ireland before October 1 ; as a proof, my brother was shooting Duck on September 27 a few years since, and saw a great number of snipe ; he went

again on October 1 and only found three. My own experience here (Co. Waterford) and in Kerry proves that in late September there are few snipe as compared with August.

Many details of the numbers killed are given by Thompson and Sir R. Payne-Gallwey, by which it appears that, though forty snipe in the day is a good day's shooting for a single gun, it has been by no means uncommonly achieved in Ireland; even sixty and eighty snipe have been sometimes shot, and there are instances recorded of as many as a hundred having been killed in a day by one sportsman.

Colonel Vernon, who has been a most constant and successful shot for a great many years, has kindly allowed me to examine his game-book, which comprises the records of twenty-five winters, from 1874 to 1902. He shot during those years, in Kerry for eleven seasons, in Galway six, in Donegal four, in Waterford three, and in Leitrim one season, and killed a total number of 9,524 snipe, besides 2,359 woodcock, and other game in proportion. This gives an average of 381 snipe per annum; but in the severe winter of 1880-81 he shot 1,073, and could have killed many more, but they were so thin as to be worthless. It is stated in the 'Fowler in Ireland,' that 1,376 were shot the same season by a Co. Clare man, named

Patrick Halloran. That was, however, an exceedingly exceptional season, when the prolonged frost and snow drove the snipe and woodcock to the west coast. There they were not only shot, but killed with sticks by the peasantry, and numbers were caught at night in herring nets dragged over those unfrozen places where snipe congregated. The reduction in their numbers caused by so disastrous a winter was observable for years afterwards.

The melanism of the common species, known as Sabine's Snipe, has occurred more than forty times in Ireland in various parts of the country, but it has not been recorded more than once from the east coast.

White and yellowish buff individuals have been frequently met with ; and all these forms are eagerly sought for by some collectors.

Mr. Howard Saunders gives the average weight of a snipe as 4 oz., but specimens have been obtained weighing as much as 6 oz., and these have been supposed to be examples of the Great Snipe, which is a totally different bird.

The Great Snipe or Solitary Snipe is known to have been obtained in Ireland but fourteen times, and is thus a bird of great rarity. Messrs. Williams, of Dublin, had been preserving birds for twenty-five years before they received a specimen, though many

large snipe had been sent to them in error as Great Snipe.

The latter bird weighs from 7 oz. to 10 oz., and its bill and legs are shorter in proportion than those of the common snipe, which has fourteen tail-feathers and a pointed tail ; while the Great Snipe has sixteen feathers which form a fan-shaped tail, and the four outer ones on each side are white. Its breast and sides are dappled and banded with black.

This bird frequents dry fields of long grass, and it holds its tail spread out in its flight, which is steadier and heavier than the flight of the common snipe.

The Jack Snipe is well known all over Ireland, but is nowhere numerous, unless indeed a locality exists nowadays that can produce this species in the numbers that Thompson described as killed near Belfast sixty years ago. He knew a man who shot fourteen to twenty-four Jack Snipe per diem on six several days, and in Thompson's opinion they usually numbered one-fourth of the total bag of snipe killed.

Sir R. Payne-Gallwey, writing in 1882, estimated that this species bore to the common snipe the proportion of one in twenty, and this agrees better with my own experience in Co. Waterford.

This little bird runs more chance of being shot than its congener, for it is slow to take wing. It rises

silently, and does not fly far, often returning to nearly the same spot. It has not the same tendency as the common snipe to shift its ground, but has even greater attachment to its favourite spot ; and though it be killed, another Jack Snipe will be found about the same place in after years.

No instance of this bird having bred in the British Islands has been authenticated. Its migration route appears to differ from that of the common snipe, which arrives most numerous on the north coast ; while of the twelve specimens of the Jack Snipe received from lighthouses by Mr. Barrington, eleven occurred on the east and south-east coast (from the Hook Tower in Co. Wexford to South Rock in Co. Down), and the twelfth at Slyne Head. Thus in all its habits it differs more or less from the common snipe.

The Red-breasted Snipe of North America has been obtained twice in Ireland the same autumn (1893). One specimen was from Tipperary, and the other from Queen's County.

These are among many instances in which American wading birds have been obtained in Ireland.

The woodcock is a bird for whose presence we must depend upon its migratory habits and its own selection of haunts—that is, upon the hereditary

ways of the species itself rather than upon its preservation. Though a good deal may be done to encourage it in the localities it frequents, by planting and seclusion, it cannot be introduced like the gallinaceous birds, nor provided with food, nor bred under human interference. One must, in fact, go for good woodcock shooting to districts where the habits of the bird lead it in winter; and the study of those habits, essential as it is in all wild shooting, is eminently so in this case. Wherever else in our islands woodcocks may or may not be, they are sure to be met with in force in Ireland.

That this was so seven hundred years ago we know from Giraldus Cambrensis, who stated that in Ireland there were 'immense flights of snipes (*Acetæ*, also called *Kardioli*), both the larger species of the woods and the smaller of the marshes,' meaning plainly the woodcock and the common snipe. The possession of an Irish name, *cúeabair* (pronounced 'cower' in imitation of the bird's croak), is also an indication that it has long been familiar to the native Irish; and the condition of the country—full of forests and vast undrained marshes—made it in past centuries still more suitable to the bird's habits than it is now.

Among later writings it is stated in Dr. Smith's

‘Kerry’ (1756) that ‘the woodlands near the River Shannon abound with prodigious plenty of woodcocks in their season’; and Mr. R. B. Thornhill, an English writer, said in 1804: ‘If a sportsman is fond of ’cock shooting, it will repay him well for his trouble to take a trip to Ireland, it is not material what part to recommend, as it is impossible almost to go to a bad place for sport.’

The woodlands of Ireland possess in this bird a species of game that more than any other evades the poacher. He may wait for it as it flies out in the twilight, but in daylight he cannot well get a shot at it without beating the woods and thus betraying his presence. This is, moreover, a bird so well able to provide for its food and comfort that it maintains good condition, even after migration and when snow has driven it to the coast.

Woodcocks resort largely during the early winter months, and while the weather is open, to mountain tracts, such as occupy most of Donegal, Achill, Connemara, and Kerry, where they make their earliest appearance in Ireland. In these districts they linger through the winter in considerable numbers, but severe gales from the Atlantic will drive them from the western parts of Connemara. They are partial to rocky wastes where there is long heather

and ling to give them sunny shelter from wind during the day ; and where springs break through the rocky hillsides, the little rills in their descending course form oases of open ground, which give the cattle a tempting bite, and accordingly provide food for the woodcocks. They scatter very much through these wilds, but have favourite haunts and corners ; and in many cases the rough, uncertain footing makes the bird a difficult shot.

But, taking Ireland at large, its woods and plantations are the chief retreats of this nocturnal bird where it rests by day : it often seeks the shelter of some holly, whose glossy leaves check the loss of warmth from the ground. In a spot of this sort one may, time after time, find a woodcock ; and when one is shot another will find out the favourite bush. In these retreats it rests or pokes about for its insect food among the decaying leaves or in the moist soil. It will sometimes creep under briars or along drains overgrown with herbage, and I have seen one fluttering in such a situation, unable to disengage itself when suddenly surprised. Young plantations that are choked with dense furze are not to the liking of woodcocks, and such can be greatly improved by cutting paths for the beaters through the under cover ; the 'cock can fly into these

openings and poke their way from them into covered spaces. They like coverts where they can see open patches of ground to alight on, whence they can run freely beneath the shelter and tangle, or get under the thick lower branches of the spruce. In these hiding places their protective colouring greatly assists in concealing them.

The late Lord Lilford has seen a 'cock in Ireland which behaved with marvellous cunning when it heard the approach of danger. It crouched close to the ground and threw the dead oak-leaves over its back, and he stated that when thus concealed a 'cock will remain still, even though shots are fired in its vicinity ; on the other hand, I have observed a woodcock which was standing on the alert, a very quaint and conspicuous object, when hounds were drawing the cover within ear-shot.

It is common to find two or more woodcocks near each other, in their favourite parts of the wood, but they generally lie more scattered than snipe, and there is nothing in 'cock shooting analogous to the wisps of the latter in the wetter marshes, unless it be when an intense frost has driven the woodcocks of a large mountain tract into some small covert. One will find them in such a place or even in the evergreens of a demesne during the first access of frost and snow.

But a continuance of this sends them from the district to the coast, where they abound in the glens at such times. In wet weather, too, woodcocks quit the woods to escape the drip of the trees, whether it be from heavy rain or 'Scotch mist,' and they then betake themselves to the open; while a cold wind sends them to the sheltered side of the hill.

For this species is most sensitive to great cold and discomfort, and is then apt to shift its ground; and though large woodlands and deep glens may be counted on to hold 'cock in all ordinary winters, yet in long-continued frost and snow, so rare a thing in Ireland, they crowd off to the sea-side and ultimately to the western shores.

Even then woodcocks are seldom in extremities or in thin condition, for when the land is covered with snow they have been found among the rocks and seaweed by Sir R. Payne-Gallwey. He has proved that they swallow mussels and other shell-fish, and besides this he has observed the beaks coated with tidal mud. Then again, Mr. Warren in the frost and snow of 1867 found on Killala Bay that woodcocks fed there among the seaweed. They lay among the rocks and large stones, where the country people killed many by stalking and knocking them down with sticks.

The great rush for life that takes place to the

western coast of Munster in severe frost and snow is shared in by hosts of the thrush family, of skylarks, starlings, lapwings, and other birds that readily migrate, which fly to those south-western peninsulas that resemble Cornwall, and even to the rocky isles beyond them, to escape the grip of the frost.

For that south-west coast of Ireland, though subject to gales from the Atlantic, is so protected from frost by its moisture that hedges of fuchsias may be seen growing there, and snow is very rare upon the sea level, especially in Kerry and Western Cork.

It is therefore not surprising that, when an extra severe winter comes, the western seaboard should abound in 'cock and snipe which have fled before the terrors of the snow.

A most memorable season of that sort was the winter of 1881, when Sir R. Payne-Gallwey saw one fowler on the coast of Clare count sixty woodcocks out of his sack after his day's shooting ; and the same author reckoned eight hundred laid out on benches together at Tralee, where over two thousand woodcocks and nine thousand snipe were received that winter by Messrs. McCowen, a firm of game-dealers. In that season of 1881 Mr. A. J. P. Wise shot five hundred and sixty in the county of Kerry. The

same causes that produce a stampede of birds from the east of Ireland towards the south-west coast, drive woodcocks over to Ulster from Scotland, and from Donegal to Sligo, in severe winters.

After a wholesale destruction of the birds the previous winter, very few 'cock arrive ; thus the memorable frost of February 1895 caused a great scarcity of them here the following winter, and Colonel Irby remarked to me that the absence of immigrants at the Spurn in the autumn of 1895 announced this scarcity throughout the United Kingdom.

But such disastrous winters are the exception in Ireland, where the season often passes without a fall of snow lying in the south for more than a few hours. Figs and peaches ripen here in the open air, and by the sea-side geraniums will creep up the side of a house uncovered from year to year.

Though the west can boast of coverts which are frequented every winter by great numbers of 'cock, these birds are by no means confined to that side of Ireland, but resort to all parts of it ; and wherever there are quiet plantings, woodcocks afford sport in their season. I have planted two hundred and fifty acres on the hills, chiefly with larch, in the County Waterford ; and though these birds used to diminish about Christmas, after their first influx was over, I

now find that, as the plantations get up and afford deeper cover, the woodcocks remain more and more throughout the winter, and their numbers extend with the young woods. In this part of Co. Waterford Colonel Vernon shot two hundred and sixty-seven woodcocks, chiefly to his own gun, in the winter of 1886-87.

There is indeed a variation in the numbers of 'cock to be found from season to season and from month to month owing to the fluctuating movements of these sensitive migrants, and this applies to some extent even to their most favourite resorts.

Those estates, however, which lie in the track of their first immigration, yield the best 'cock shooting one year with another. The Co. Sligo contains several such, and at Ashford, Co. Galway, Lord Ardilaun has woods on the shores of Lough Mask, specially preserved for 'cock shooting ; then the woods of Glenstal in Co. Limerick, and those of Muckross in Kerry, should be specially mentioned.

'Cock-shooting parties are seldom organised before November, during which month, and during the first ten days of December, the largest numbers arrive ; but October sees the first part of the immigration, and there are some instances of arrivals observed at Co. Donegal lighthouses in September ; Thompson cites

other cases from Donegal and Antrim even as early as the 20th of September.

The great annual 'cock-shoot at Ashford does not take place until January, for it is the experience of Lord Ardilaun that the woodcocks keep increasing in numbers in the coverts after various spells of severe weather on the hills, and a smaller number each time return to the heather; but nothing drives them in like hail.

The elucidation of the migration-route of our woodcocks is chiefly due to the labours of Mr. R. M. Barrington, who has been investigating the subject of bird migration at Irish light-stations for more than twenty years. The accumulated results show that Ulster light-stations yield more observations of the woodcock than those of all the rest of Ireland, and that the notices of it from the west coast are greatly in excess of those from the east and south; moreover, 'the more northerly stations of the east and west coasts receive larger numbers of woodcocks than do the more southerly.' The earliest records too are from the north, and the next earliest from the west coast down to the Skelligs, islands off Kerry. It is indeed to be expected that birds which come from more northern lands should arrive sooner than their kindred which begin the journey further south, the

winter being earlier in the higher latitudes. This may account for the later arrivals of woodcocks on the south coast of Ireland as compared with the coasts of Ulster and Connaught.

It has become evident from this migration inquiry that the flights of woodcocks first strike Inishtrahull, the most northerly isle of Ireland, which has yielded twenty-six observations, more than any other; then West Donegal stations follow in point of time and numbers; while the Skelligs come next and give thirteen observations; then Slyne Head in S.W. Connaught and the Maidens off Antrim afford eleven each.

In corroboration of these statements is the great mass of testimony of Irish sportsmen as to the earlier appearance of woodcocks in the west, and the very act of arrival has been witnessed on the coast of Kerry, while the birds are regularly met with in Western Kerry and Western Cork before they appear in the east of those counties.

All this shows that the main immigration of woodcocks comes, as Thompson believed, from the direction of Scotland. They may cross that country from Norway by the Forth and Clyde route, or by the valley of the Caledonian Canal, or may come round by the Pentland Firth; probably some travel by all

those routes, and others come to Ireland after having used Scotland as a resting-place or after breeding there. On reaching the North of Ireland some pass down the Antrim coast to the east side of the island, but the great majority betake themselves to the west coast. Connaught confronts them with a cliff-barrier which rises to eight hundred feet in Western Mayo, but, without facing this awful, tempestuous coast, migrant birds from the north can cross to Galway Bay and the coast of Munster by a shorter and safer course ; the chain of lakes from Killala Bay, Loughs Conn, Mask, and Corrib, lie in the migration route of many other species, and along their shores are some of the most famous 'cock-coverts in Ireland. In the north of Sligo woodcocks first appear in October on the higher mountains, about two thousand feet above the sea, according to Captain Wynne of Hazlewood.

The woodcock is not singular in adopting the northern route to the west of Ireland, for it is used by our northern winter migrants generally, from the Snow Bunting and the Greenland Falcon to the Bernacle Goose and the Ireland Gull.

Flights of woodcocks, from whatever cause, sometimes perish in the Atlantic wholesale ; their drowned bodies have been observed from an ocean

steamer which was returning from America during the stormy October and November of 1881.

Some woodcocks arrive on the Wexford coast, and this is shown both by the observations of light-keepers there and by the evidence of persons resident in the county. 'Cock have been found entangled in nets spread out to dry on the bent-grass of the sand-hills; and Thompson stated that the immigrant birds, after resting a day or two among the fern on the Wexford coast, used to proceed to the Mountain of Forth, where Major Walker met with numbers on their arrival and before their departure.

But if the majority of these birds that visit Ireland came direct from England and Wales, the eastern and southern sides of Ireland would be the most famous for them, and they would be reported from there earlier in the season. On the contrary, it is the Donegal coast alone that affords notices of woodcocks in September, but on the south-east coast they are later than on any other.

In certain years the autumnal migration is observed over a wide area, woodcocks being reported within a few days in November and December from various sides of Ireland; in all these widespread movements the west coast participated, and they all took place within the first and last quarters of the

moon.¹ In Co. Waterford coverts 'cock usually attain their full numbers from the middle of November to the middle of December, and they remain through January, unless driven away by heavy snow; but extra hard weather, when it does occur, is apt to send them off towards Kerry.

These birds sometimes diminish about Christmas or in January, but reappear in February or early March, even as late as the first week in April on various parts of the east coast; and the same thing has been observed in Achill, where many frequent the glens and mountain-slopes over the sea. The Rev. Mr. Garde, who lived at Cloyne, Co. Cork, stated that he had once shot fourteen couple of 'cock to his own gun on Capel Island in March. This island lies off the eastern shore of Co. Cork, not far from the mouth of the Blackwater. In Kerry also they have been noticed to gather on the west coast preparatory to their spring migration. In Inishowen, the most northerly part of Donegal, woodcocks, which arrive there early in autumn, are sometimes seen in the heath when April is far advanced.² By that time the home-breeding woodcocks would have eggs; but this

¹ *Migration of Birds at Irish Light-stations*, by R. M. Barrington. Porter, London. Ponsonby, Dublin.

² Thompson, ii. 243.

is quite consistent with the habits of other species, like the golden plover, some of which are nesting in this country, while others which are bound for northern countries still delay their departure.

March 1 is too late for the commencement of the close season, for before the end of February some woodcocks have begun to breed. The sharp, evening note which Thompson renders 'wisp,' but which is more like 'chizzic,' has been heard in February as well as in November, but it becomes frequent in March, and is then preceded by a croaking sound, twice or thrice repeated, which sounds to some like the words, 'more rain to-morrow.' Sometimes one and sometimes both of these notes are heard, and they proceed from a woodcock going its rounds on the wing. This evening flight, called 'roading,' takes place about the close of day, from March until June or July inclusive. It is continued until darkness conceals the bird, which returns over the same ground again and again. In a large wood, where many are on the wing, every one of them may be heard calling; and when they chase one another they curve and turn with great rapidity and ease in a manner that reminds one of the bat's flight. I have been fascinated by watching two of them performing these wonderful gyrations as they chased and sported

with each other over a pool in the twilight, with evident delight, ever appearing and disappearing in their airy dance.

The beginning and increase of the breeding of the woodcock in Ireland in the nineteenth century is one of those facts for which no sufficient cause is known, but which is of a piece with the history of other species, such as the starling and the tufted duck. These birds, though so long known as winter visitors, have only adopted this country generally as a breeding-ground within the past century, while a like extension of their breeding range has been observed in Great Britain, especially in Scotland, and a similar increase of woodcocks that remain and breed has been noted in the larger island.

The first instance known to Thompson was that of a young woodcock, shot in company with a parent bird, at Lord de Vesci's in Queen's County in 1833; but before 1841 the nesting of woodcocks had been reported from the counties of Wexford, Antrim, Down, Wicklow, and Waterford. Details are given¹ of the nests found at Tollymore Park, Co. Down, where the first reported were three that were discovered in 1837; but within ten years they had increased to thirty nests in that demesne. Mr. Pentland gives an

¹ Thompson, ii. 249-255.

interesting account of woodcocks breeding at Glenstal, Co. Limerick, in the 'Field' for September 29, 1889. The first nest was found there in 1870, and the subsequent increase was such that in 1888 about sixty nests were known to the keepers. At Clonbrock, Co. Galway, the first nest was discovered in or about 1868, so that the available information on this subject points to the breeding of woodcocks having begun later in the West of Ireland.

The nesting and increase in summer of these birds has for some time become an established fact in every county in Ireland, and it is now thought that in several large coverts there are more woodcocks in summer than in winter; though this may be due to their habit of showing themselves and calling on the wing in the long summer evenings, while their winter flight to their feeding-grounds is unnoticed in the dark.

I have repeatedly seen nests in my own and neighbouring woods in the county of Waterford. Eggs are often laid in March and occasionally in February, as stated by Mr. Colgan, a gamekeeper, on whom I could rely. Thompson was informed of nests in the latter month, and the Hon. R. E. Dillon has seen a woodcock fly off with her young one on March 19. Young are frequently seen during the

first half of April and onwards into August, eggs have been repeatedly found until late in July, and an instance has been given by Mr. R. W. Norman of a woodcock found sitting on eggs in November. It is therefore evident that the species produces two broods in the season. The regular number of eggs is four, as in the case of all birds of this order (*Charadriadæ*); their shape is less pointed or pyriform than in kindred species. In colouring, woodcocks' eggs vary a good deal, some of them having a ground of a decided brownish tint with heavy blotches of dark brown and lilac; others are very pallid, with small rounded spots and specks. On the whole, they assimilate greatly in colour to the dead leaves and other surrounding objects.

The nest, whether on high or on low ground, is always placed in some dry part of the wood which is sufficiently open for the bird to fly off if disturbed, never under thick cover nor tangle. It is always a hollow made in the ground, often among wood-rush, dead leaves, or the needles off the fir and larch trees; these materials, with some small dead twigs, are used in some cases merely to form a ring round the nesting hollow, but in other nests they amount to a good capful.

The site is frequently near the foot of some tree,

towards which the hatching bird turns her tail, keeping her neck drawn in and her bill buried in the leaves ; she trusts so much to the protection of her colouring to avoid observation that I have touched a sitting woodcock before she flew off. Persons have stroked the head of one on her nest without moving her.

The young quit the nest very soon, and are covered with a thick pile of down so coloured as to make them almost indistinguishable from their surroundings when they squat, as they do when alarmed, like the young of other ground-breeding birds. If an intruder approaches them the old bird will flit round him to draw off his attention, and if a dog comes on the scene she will even confront him, while flapping her wings and uttering loud outcries to draw him off.

The woodcock will not only fly away with her young to save them from danger, but does so habitually to remove them from the dry nesting-grounds to moist feeding-places. Colgan, the Brittas keeper, saw one of these birds get up before him carrying a nestling, and when she alighted with it she uttered vociferous sounds. He then sat down to watch her, and she came running back towards him, exhibiting no shyness ; on reaching another little one that had been left behind, she began to flutter and

throw out her wings until she had seized it between her feet, when she flew off with it. James MacEvoy, a woodman on the same estate, saw a woodcock carry by turns three of her young ones past him as he worked in the woods where there was nothing to cause alarm ; in this case the bill was pressed inwards towards the breast to help in supporting her offspring. In many cases, however, the head and beak of the old bird have been seen disengaged, while the young was either pressed between her thighs and breast or held dangling between her outstretched feet. These various statements as to the mode in which the woodcock holds her young in flight have led to a great deal of discussion, but the difficulty has been solved by the statement of two ladies in this country, Miss Fairholme of Comragh and her sister, whose accuracy of observation in matters of natural history enhances the value of the narrative. I will quote Miss Fairholme's written words :

My sister and I were standing in a field here one day in May last (1900), and our two dogs were hunting in a small oak-wood on the other side of the fence near us, when we heard a noise close behind us, something like the cry of a kestrel, but not quite so loud. On turning round we saw a woodcock crouching on the ground, fluttering her wings and crying. On going a step or two towards her, to see if she were hurt, she gathered up two little ones ; one clasped to her breast by her head and

beak, and the other between her feet. She flew on slowly a few yards to the top of a very low bank where she let down the young ones, and crouched over them, fluttering her wings and crying as before. We waited to see what would happen, when the dogs came out over the fence of the wood. The bird immediately raised up the two young ones as before, and flew back into the oak-wood. Both flights were short, and she flew heavily and near the ground, so that we saw the whole proceeding perfectly.

Miss Fairholme also remarked that the bird's bill was not seen during these flights, but that she put it out when she let down the nestling.¹

The importance of this account is that it shows how a woodcock can carry her young, either by her legs and feet, or pressed under her neck and bill. The act of carrying off the young is performed even when they look nearly as large as their parent. In such a case the young one would need to be closely grasped to the body, but it is easily conceivable that the old bird could lift it when very small by her feet with extended legs, as shown in a plate in the 'Zoologist' 1879.

An interesting question is—what becomes of the woodcocks, after they have reared their broods, in the latter part of August and September? Their general disappearance at that time is noticed every-

¹ *Birds of Ireland*, p. 410, by Ussher and Warren. Gurney and Jackson, 1900.

where, and the prevalent belief is that they quit Ireland, and are replaced by the birds that arrive in October or later. There are, however, some facts and observations which contradict this view, though more evidence on the subject is to be wished for.

I have many notices of 'cock seen in Ireland, sometimes by my personal friends, in August and September, though it cannot be maintained that they are then easily found. In a letter by R. G. Campbell, Mourne Park, Co. Down, printed in the 'Field' of June 14, 1884, it is stated that woodcocks there 'betake themselves to the sandy hills in August and September to moult, and these sandy hills they find on the Mourne Park Estate in the outside coverts, and there they can be seen in September.'

In the 'Irish Naturalist' 1893, p. 85, Mr. James Johnston describes his experiences of woodcocks in a covert he had searched during three or four previous autumns. He says :

An observer might tramp to and fro there in August or early September, and unless assisted by a good dog, he will probably go away thinking that there was not a single woodcock . . . It is no wonder these birds at this time of year prefer to skulk in the thickest cover ; in fact, until their wing feathers are grown, it is almost as hard to find a woodcock as a Water-Rail. . . For the past three seasons I have visited the covert early in

August to find out how many clutches there were ; I do this with the aid of my spaniel, and I calculate from the appearance of the young how soon they will be fit to shoot. I generally make my first bag about the middle of September. The old birds are not fit to shoot then, but it is easy to distinguish the young, which are much brighter in colour. I sometimes, though rarely, do make a mistake, and then what a wretched-looking object my dog brings ! I do not know any bird that in moulting casts its feathers so freely as a woodcock. Sometimes the bird will show a perfectly bare patch on the back.

In favour of the opinion that the woodcocks bred in Ireland remain in winter is a case cited by Mr. Pentland in which silver rings were attached to nine young birds at Glenstal in 1888, and one of these was shot there the following Christmas. It would, of course, be unsafe to rely upon a single instance, but if the opinion quoted by Thompson¹ be correct, that the woodcocks bred here are literally residents, this does not conflict with the fact that a large proportion of the species have a different way of spending the year. Large flights undoubtedly come to these islands from Northern Europe, pass the winter here like the fieldfares, and do not leave our shores completely until after the resident woodcocks have begun to breed. The golden plover and ringed plover afford similar instances of species some of which are only

¹ Vol. ii. 254.

winter visitants to these countries, while others stay and rear their young.

The difficulty of believing that our breeding woodcocks remain here in winter arises from the following consideration : an increasing settlement of these birds in the breeding season has undoubtedly taken place within the last sixty or seventy years, and if those which nest here, with their young, have reinforced the former winter contingent, there should be better 'cock-shooting in winter nowadays than formerly. This, unfortunately, is not the case, for the numbers that frequent our woods in winter are generally allowed to be smaller than of old.

There has, of course, been a large increase of woods and plantations in Scotland as well as in Ireland, and this may lead to numbers of 'cock being detained in the former country that might otherwise visit Ireland, while our own birds have a larger choice of coverts than their predecessors had. The whole subject of the migrations of woodcocks and other birds requires for its elucidation an extensive and sustained series of observations, made both at light-houses and inland resorts ; and everyone who can contribute evidence about it will do well to publish the same in such periodicals as the 'Field,' the 'Zoologist,' and the 'Irish Naturalist.'

It is not ascertained that the woodcocks which remain here in summer differ in plumage from those that breed in Northern Europe and visit our islands in winter ; the differences that do occur being attributable to age and to individual variation. Mr. Howard Saunders states that in the young bird the outer webs of all the primary wing-feathers show distinct fulvous notches, but that there are hardly any such markings on the first and second outer webs in the adult ; he also says that the second year's plumage is paler than that of the first year. Pied woodcocks have often been met with, and in one described by Mr. E. Williams the primaries were all pure white ; there was a white collar round the neck, and the rest of the plumage was dappled with white feathers. Some pure white specimens, and others of a pale yellowish buff or light fawn colour, have been preserved. I had a specimen in which the reddish brown bars were replaced by a dull leaden tint. These variations are 'sports of nature' which do not affect the general history of the species.

COCK-SHOOTING

The woodcock is so fitful and tricky in its flight when put up by beaters in the daytime, that every

precaution should be taken to prevent it from flying back ; and as far as the ground admits of it, the beaters must be kept strictly in line. To facilitate 'cock-shooting I have, when planting land, laid out and left unplanted a system of rides along the hill-sides. These are spaced two chains = one hundred and thirty-two feet, from centre to centre ; they are at first about twelve feet wide, and as the growing trees infringe on them they are made wider still by cutting back their margins. Three beaters' paths are cleared in each block of planting, between every pair of rides, and run parallel with them. The guns, on the rides, walk in line with the beaters, and in the control of the latter I find it far better to restrain those in advance than to hasten those lagging behind, as the latter are frequently delayed by the difficulties of the cover, which often make fast progress impossible. It is, moreover, a mistake to hurry over the ground, as careful beating is most necessary, and the shooter who tries to walk fast over uneven ground diminishes his chances of a steady aim when ' Mark 'cock ' is heard.

I have found young lads, when trained to beating, most serviceable, for they get through the cover readily, and are more agile and manageable than older men. If permitted to shout the whole party of

beaters will keep up a continual outcry of 'Hi ! 'cock,' which drives the game away before it is approached ; the sound of sticks is often quite sufficient, and should at least not be drowned by the voices. In deep glens and thick woods, however, where rides are few, more noise is probably required.

If the party be large enough, a gun or two should walk far in advance of the rest to intercept any birds that may fly on ahead ; and these guns take up positions at the end of the wood when they reach it, so as to enflade the ends of all the rides. It is during the last moments of a beat, when the sportsman often relaxes his attention, that birds which have run on towards the end of the covert are so apt to rise and get away. A friend of mine used to employ beaters in Kerry in 'cock-shooting, and one day, as he was lecturing the youths for not keeping in line, he held up to them the example of an older man of the party who was an admirable beater. The latter remarked that in his youth he had been trained under a gentleman who maintained such discipline that if a beater broke line he would take a shot at him ; but 'them times are gone.'

The woods of the Co. Sligo are some of the earliest to receive woodcocks in autumn, and hold them well. Three hundred 'cock have been killed in three days



'NO SHOUTING!'



at Lissadell by eight guns, and 338 were shot there in six days in the early part of 1867 by a party of about seven guns. In the winter of 1878-9 two guns shot forty 'cock in a day, four guns also shot 124 on two consecutive days; and as many as sixty-six were killed by four guns on one occasion in 1880-81. In January and February 1895, during eighteen days, 498 were shot at Lissadell by parties which averaged four guns. At Hazlewood six guns have got sixty-seven 'cock on a snowy day, and Captain Wynne informs me that in one season in the nineties, 749 had been shot by February 10, when the shooting was discontinued.

The above figures relating to Lissadell and the following, which refer to 1881 and previous years, have been cited by Sir R. Payne-Gallwey.

At Muckross, Killarney, 840 woodcocks fell before a party which averaged five guns in ten days in the winter of 1863-64, the total number shot there that season being 1,250.

Colonel Vernon, who has shot regularly in wild parts of Ireland every winter for a great many years, has kindly lent me his game-book, which shows that during the twenty-one seasons from 1874 to 1898 the 'cock killed amounted to 2,319, or more than 110 on an average, the highest number in one winter being

309 killed in Kerry in 1881; but during the three winters, 1885-88, that he was in the Co. Waterford 606 'cock were shot, averaging 202 per annum. Except a very small proportion, the above were killed by Colonel Vernon's own gun, as he shot most of every season alone. Of the shooting seasons named, eleven were spent in Kerry, six in Galway, and one in Leitrim.

The following are some bags made at Ashford, Lord Ardilaun's estate in Co. Galway:—

JANUARY 1890.

7 guns on January 29. $91\frac{1}{2}$ couple of woodcocks (183 birds). During the four days' shoot 300 woodcock were killed.

JANUARY 1891.

7 guns on January 19. $104\frac{1}{2}$ couple of woodcocks (209 birds). During six days' shoot 494 woodcocks were killed.

JANUARY 1895.

7 guns on January 25. $102\frac{1}{2}$ couple of woodcocks (205 birds). During the six days' shoot 508 woodcocks were killed.

JANUARY 1897.

6 guns on January 27. 64 couples of woodcocks (128 birds). During the six days' shoot 307 woodcocks were killed.

JANUARY 1898.

7 guns on best day, 59 couple of woodcocks. During the week 300 woodcocks were killed.

JANUARY 1899.

7 guns on January 13. 84 couples of woodcocks (168 birds). During the week 400 woodcocks were killed.

The above are the best bags since 1890.

COOKERY
OF
THE SNIPE AND THE WOODCOCK

BY
ALEXANDER INNES SHAND



COOKERY

THE woodcock has as warm a welcome on the table as in the coverts, which is saying a great deal, nor is the snipe much less appreciated. But the woodcock is the more valued for his comparative rarity. You may be satiated with partridges or pheasants—even with grouse in August and September—but the woodcocks come in capricious flights, and, when there is open weather in the far north, may provokingly defer their arrival. They are essentially birds of passage, and though many breed in the West of Ireland, in the combes of our southern counties, and in the great pine-woods of the Scottish Highlands, they cannot now be said to have naturalised themselves with us. It must have been very different in the olden time, when England was forest land from Tyne to Trent, when the Eastern shires were overgrown with reed and sedge, and when Somerset was still as swampy as when Alfred sought a refuge there. Then the birds had all they could desire, food and freedom from

disturbance. We may judge how they abounded under the Plantagenets, when we read that, at the installation banquet of the Kingmaker's brother as Archbishop of York, four hundred woodcocks figured at the feast. They must all have been snared or netted in the neighbourhood—we should like to know how many fell victims to the springes—and it is melancholy to think of the barbarous cookery, when they were roasted and shrivelled by the bushel. That banquet, by the way, gives an interesting idea of English ornithology in 1647, and of the omnivorous tastes of our ancestors. There were swans, herons, and cranes, plovers, goodwits, redshanks, knotts, ruffs and reeves, curlews, rails and egrets, quails and bitterns, larks and sparrows, with sundry other small 'fowles' it is difficult to identify. And the birds were sent up promiscuously with the fishes, with occasional interludes of *entremets* or a solid *pièce de résistance*.

Woodcocks vary considerably in size ; they range from ten to sixteen ounces or even more ; but, thanks to their roving habits, you can always rely more or less on the flavour. A Bohemian pheasant, or one reared on the Welsh hills or among the rowan trees of a Highland glen, is different as possible from his lowland relative who has been hand-fed on buckwheat in

home coverts, and you can tell at the first mouthful whether the grouse bought promiscuously at the poulterer's has been impregnating himself with bitter on the heather shoots or raiding the corn sheaves in the Yorkshire Ridings. But when you go marketing for woodcock you are fairly safe. All wandering wild birds are fastidious as to their fare ; they diligently search for the delicacies that tempt their palates, and in England we foolishly neglect some of the best of them. In that respect we might learn many a lesson from the Italians. Wheat-ears and larks we have learned to like ; but the robin, with the faint *souçon* / of the bitter of the grouse, is scarcely inferior to the ortolan. We admit that it seems inhuman to sacrifice that confiding friend who is always at hand to pick up the crumbs at luncheons in the coverts, but we need have no such scruples with the fieldfares or with the red-wings, who, although the most piquant of the succulent thrushes, are seldom seen on an English table. With the woodcocks and most of the larks caught in the autumn they are merely casual visitors, stopping here for their own convenience, and we need have small scruple in taking toll of them. But most of these migrants are flighty and restless ; the woodcock is the exception : he hates exercise after heavy meals, and, as he is for ever stuffing, when

undisturbed by obnoxious guns, he always keeps in prime condition.

Dear as he is to all devotees of the table, nowhere perhaps is he more keenly appreciated than by the forlorn watchers in lonely lighthouses? When a flight is on, and the weather is hazy, the birds are dashing themselves against the glass in Heligoland, and falling stunned or paralysed in the gallery. There, however, the keepers are on the land, and regularly supplied with provisions; but on Skerryvore and other beacons on the rocks in the Outer Hebrides the flights have sometimes relieved those outposts of civilisation when rations had been reduced and they were on the verge of starvation.

It is strange how little we find about the cooking of the woodcock in English literature, ancient or modern, in books on sport or natural history, on cookery or in fiction. Old Gervase Markham, who in 1614 dedicated his 'Cheape and Good husbandry for the vvell-ordering of All Beasts and Fowles' to the accomplished Lord Dorset, had sound culinary notions and has much to say of the kitchen. He gives us to understand that the practice of artificial cramming was then carried to extraordinary lengths. He has directions for the fattening of caged godwits, knots, grey plover, and curlews, but there is not a word of

the woodcock. Perhaps it is just as well, for the system he counsels is essentially vicious. Fancy preparing a woodcock for the table, or a plover or a curlew, for the matter of that, on a diet of 'fresh wheate-meale, mixed with milk'! Shakspeare draws a metaphor from the woodcock in *Hamlet*, and I believe Ben Jonson makes casual allusion to the bird, but he is ignored by our sylvan poets and our novelists. The reason for that may be that few of them were sportsmen. And though Gilbert White and other naturalists have many remarks as to his habits—and some of them are extremely speculative—they never rank him as a delicacy with the larks and the wheat-ears.

As to the cookery books, there is doubtless another explanation. The French and other foreigners were our masters in all the refinements of the art, and English cookery, almost to the beginning of the last century, was primitive in the extreme. Such lights of science as there were, were burning or flickering in the metropolis, and London was far removed from the favourite haunts of the 'cocks. Consignments were rare, the arrivals were few, and the birds had deteriorated with interminable delays. When Pepys, in his coach, lost his way between Portsmouth and London, what chance was there for the trail of a 'cock

despatched by the stage waggon from the Hampshire or Surrey coasts? It is impossible to over-estimate the boon conferred on gastronomy by rapid railway transit and the parcel post. Can there be a more agreeable surprise when you come down to breakfast than the card box on the table, with a brace or leash of plump woodcock, marked with the date of their demise, only four and twenty hours before? Now that London is in swift connection with the glens of Kerry or the lochs of Western Ross, the woodcock comes to us nearly in perfection and he is beginning to be estimated as he ought to be, though it is true that you can only have the trail at the very best when he is eaten, like the crimped and curdled salmon, within a few hours of his sudden euthanasia. Towards the beginning of the nineteenth century, that illustrious *gourmet* Lord Alvanley carried off the prize at White's for the most delicate and costly dish that could be devised. There were cocks' combs and the oysters of pheasants, fillets of the snipe, and many other good things, but the trail and the brain of the woodcock are conspicuous by their absence. For the brain has a marvellously sublimated essence of its own, and we marvel that when Apicius or Lucullus was using the brains of peacocks and nightingales by the hundred in a single *plat* he overlooked the

woodcock, which has always been more common on the Alban Hills and in the Campagna than the melodious Philomel.

Even now the bird is comparatively neglected with us, though it always commands fair prices in the markets. There is a season when we are absolutely sickened with quails: they figure as *rôts* or in other forms at every dinner party, as the turbot and turkeys which Thackeray abused when familiarity had bred disgust. Why not vary the *menu* with more of the woodcocks, simply roasted on a substratum of truffled toast?

‘Simply roasted,’ I say, for, whether from ignorance, indifference, or on principle, the English treatment of the woodcock has at least the inestimable merit of simplicity. Of all birds, like his congeners the plover and the snipe, you can do no better than leave him to himself. For the grand object with all game is to cherish the natural aroma, and that of the woodcock is incomparable and unimprovable. There are fragrant essences, such as that of the truffle, which may be blended advantageously—indeed, the wedding of the truffle and the woodcock is a veritable love-match—but they must be severely subdued. Brillat-Savarin, a born *connoisseur*, and consequently an exception to his countrymen of the florid school of *cuisine*, thoroughly understood that. Prefacing

with the obvious remark that the woodcock is a bird *très distingué*, he goes on to say that it is never in all its glory save when roasted under the eyes of the sportsman, especially of the sportsman who has killed it: 'then the roast is accomplished according to rule, and the mouth "*s'inonde des délices.*"' There, possibly, the sentimental submerges the practical, for the *chasseur* may be a dead shot and an earnest gastronome without the faintest knowledge of the delicate art of roasting. But it is certain that I have never appreciated roast woodcock more than in a Highland shooting box, where, from the close vicinity of kitchen to dining room, you always knew exactly what was dressing for dinner. The woodcock should be served glowing hot, and rushed from the spit to the table. How can he have justice done him in a club palace in Pall Mall with scores of dishes being sent up in a scramble, or in a *grande maison*, where the culinary laboratories are a sabbath day's journey from the banqueting-hall, and where the *maitre-trancheur* does his listless carving at a sideboard?

Strange to say, the woodcock figures as little in French literature as in English. Dumas, who was a keen sportsman and bred in the broad forests of Villers-Cotterets, who prided himself on his gifts of cookery and spent hours over his kitchen fires in his fantastic

château of Monte Cristo, as the Regent Orleans relaxed from cares of State in his chemical experiments, makes no allusion to the bird, although in his 'Impressions de Voyage' he makes frequent mention of the snipe, and alludes to the special gastronomical delicacies of every country he visited. His 'Meneur de Loups,' poaching the woodlands with his infernal pack, gathering up various sorts of feathered game, from pheasants to *râles de genêt*, never includes either *bécasse* or *bécassine* in his game-gifts to his gossip Magloire. George Sand, in her sympathetic descriptions of the game of the Sologne, speaks of pheasants and red-legs and water-fowl, but never of woodcocks and seldom of snipes. What is even more remarkable, the socialist sybarite Eugène Sue, in decking the stall of Leonard the *braconnier* in the *orangerie* of his uncle Dr. Gasterini, omits the woodcock among the festoons of feathered trophies which hung over the *hures de sanglier* and the haunches of venison. Yet I suppose that in his time, as at the present day, he might have seen the 'cocks with their mottled plumage, most beautiful in death, among the chief ornaments of the richly tinted display in the windows of Chevet or Potier. In fact, the woodcock has happily inspired the Viennese and Bavarian woodcarvers, who have rivalled, in their decorations of dining *salons*, the most exquisite work of

Grinling Gibbons. In Viennese hotels and fashionable restaurants I have been struck with the appropriateness of the sculptured effigies adorning the buffets and side-tables, when the *rôti* or *salmi* was being served with the Voslauer, Erlauer, or Champagne.

For the woodcock, as I said, is scattered all over Europe, and there are countries he favours far more than our own islands. The coverts around Rome are haunts of his predilection. In the markets of the Piazza Navona, or on stalls under the shadows of the Pantheon, you may see the birds hanging of a morning by the score. They always figured among the *rôtis* at a Roman dinner at the Minerva. Not a few are knocked over at the great *battues* in the woods of Bohemia and Lower Austria, and there are no finer birds than those that used to be sold for a trifle in Vienna. I have golden dreams of suppers after the opera or theatres at the Archduke Charles and the Golden Lamb in the Leopoldstadt. I remember more simple repasts at the Kaiserin Elisabeth at Ischl, when woodcocks, preluded by venison cutlets, followed trout of your own catching from the Traun. For the hotel-keeper there consented to cook the contents of your own basket, and did not insist on scooping the fish out of his reservoirs. But my associations with 'cocks in super-

abundance are in connection with British garrisons. One Christmas at Gibraltar, when an honorary member of a regimental mess, they used to be imported in such profusion from Morocco that each morning any man might have two or three for breakfast, making elegant extracts of trails and thighs. At times, in the Ionian Isles, in the happy days of our occupation, they were perhaps even more abundant. At Corfu or Cephalonia, occasionally, and especially when a shooting party came across from the Albanian coast with a bark ballasted with game, your soul came almost to loathe the savoury food, as the Israelites turned up their noses at quails in the desert. For the woodcock, like old Madeira, to be enjoyed, must be indulged in with moderation. On the other hand, I remember in a slow coasting voyage of one of the Austrian Lloyds up the Gulf of Trieste, when on an ill-found steamer we had been brought to short commons, the relief and exhilaration when one fine morning at Zara the steward came on board with lamb and kid and a basketful of woodcocks.

Yet English *gourmets*, as has been said, have been strangely indifferent to the subtle charm of both woodcock and snipe. Walker, the ingenious author of the 'Original,' was eccentric as to rules of health

and crotchety as Dr. Kitchener—another great gastro-nomic pundit, who practised in profuse hospitality the doctrines he preached—but a sound authority on the art of dining. Hayward, in his instructive treatise with that title, ranks him not unjustly with Brillat-Savarin. Walker arranged his little dinners for eight, which, like Sir Henry Thompson with his famous octaves, he considered the perfect number, on the happiest conjunction of simplicity and excellence. He specially prided himself on one he gave at Lovegrove's at Blackwall: no soup but turtle: no fish but whitebait: no meat but grouse, with some sweets to follow. Hayward objects to the turtle as out of place at a Blackwall dinner, and remarks that the dinner came off too late in the year for eating the whitebait in perfection. That particular entertainment may have been somewhat early for woodcock, which seldom make their appearance till late in September, but it is strange that Walker, with his *flair* for all that was best, should never have had a *menu* 'with no meat but woodcock.'

I have praised the simple treatment by English cooks, but it must be admitted that where 'cocks abound it may become somewhat monotonous. It is certain that, with a single doubtful exception in the case of Meg Dods, their receipts never go beyond

the roast and the *salmi* ; or, in other words, the roast to-day and the *réchauffé* to-morrow. Assuredly simplicity cannot be carried farther. A friend, who owns many coverts in Kerry, and knows as much about the shooting and cooking of woodcocks as most men, favours me with an Irish receipt : ‘Boil your woodcock in butter and then show him the fire on a spit.’ It seems a melancholy proof that barbarous traditions still linger in benighted districts of the Wild West. For plain cookery Mistress Dods (Mrs. Johnstone) is hard to beat, so we may turn to her for the roasting. It is to be noted that she thinks it needful to notice that ‘they must not be drawn, *as the intestines are considered a delicacy.*’ Considered a delicacy ! ‘Keep till tender.’ (Alas for the trails !) ‘Tie them to a bird spit and lay them down to a clear, brisk fire. Lay slices of toast in the dripping pan to catch the trail’ (rather the essences exuding from the trail). ‘These birds and moor game require to be deluged with butter in basting. Dish them on the toasts, pour clear brown beef gravy very hot into the dish, and set it on a hot table or chafing dish. These birds will take from thirty-five to forty minutes, according to size.’

We doubt about the flooding in beef gravy : if used at all, it should be used very charily, but the

sauce Meg recommends, and to which she was very partial, christened Pleydell's, after the amateur of wild ducks in 'Guy Mannering,' is an excellent one.

A half-pint of claret and the same quantity of good brown gravy : make the gravy boil, put the wine to it, with pepper, salt, cayenne, and the juice of two Seville oranges : let them simmer for a few minutes and serve hot.

We said Meg had another way besides the *rôti* and the *salmi*, and as she introduces it in a note with a special flourish of trumpets we give it, though it sounds to us sacrilegious. We have never tried devilling a woodcock, but it strikes us that bedevilling would be the more appropriate term.

The following receipt for the preparation of devils is the best that has yet been disclosed, for in this philosophic and amateur department of cookery profound mystery has as yet been observed. Mix equal parts of common salt, pounded cayenne, and curry powder with double the quantity of mushroom or truffle powder. Dissect a brace of woodcock (if under-cooked so much the better), sub-divide the legs, wings, back, &c., and powder all the pieces with the seasoning well mixed. Bruise the brain and trails with the yolk of a hard-boiled egg, a very little pounded mace, the grate of half a lemon and half a spoonful of soy. Mix these together till they become smooth and add a tablespoonful of cats-up, a glass of Madeira and the juice of two Seville oranges. Throw this sauce along with the birds into a

silver stew-dish to be heated by a lamp. Cover it close and keep gently simmering, occasionally stirring, until the flesh has imbibed the greater part of the liquid. When completely saturated, throw in a small quantity of salad-oil and serve instantly.

Mrs. Dods adds :

The only remaining direction the writer of this admirable receipt gives is that as in picking the bones your fingers must necessarily be much impregnated with the flavour of the devil, you must be careful in licking them not to swallow them entirely.

It may be so, but surely drenching in soy and salad oil is putting the woodcock to vile use.

All receipts for the *salmi* are much the same. That of Lady Harriet St. Clair is perhaps the simplest and good as any :

Cut in pieces two woodcocks, previously half-roasted, put them into a stew-pan with three quarters of a pint of gravy, an onion with two or three cloves stuck in it, an anchovy, a piece of butter rolled in flour, a little cayenne and salt to taste ; simmer for about a quarter of an hour, but do not let it boil ; then put in a glass of red wine and a squeeze of lemon. The livers and trails should be bruised in the sauce. ✓

The 'glass of red wine' is vague, as it may range from Chambertin down to *piquette*. Burgundy is better than claret, and Madeira or brown sherry preferable to either. Bruising the liver is inevitable,

but rather heart-breaking: the liver as prepared for the table by Nature is infinitely superior to anything produced by the slow torture of Strasburg geese. Dubois, as is only natural with a French scientist, refines upon English recipes. He recommends the *salmi* being served with a border of game forcemeat with a sauce prepared from Espagnole, with a few spoonfuls of *fumet* of game and a little Madeira gradually introduced.

But the illustrious French chefs take a far wider range with both woodcock and snipe, giving their genius free play in manipulation and ornamentation. First and foremost the woodcock comes in as an accessory or auxiliary in that sublime *plat*, the *faisan à la Sainte-Alliance*, for which Brillat-Savarin gave the receipt, and for which the 'Trois Frères Provençaux' was specially famous. The pheasant is stuffed with two woodcocks, boned and separated into two portions—one of the flesh, the other of the livers and trails. The intestines are plugged with truffles, and so the balm of the stuffing saturates the pheasant, while the dripping falls on a bed of toast covered with the stuffing of woodcock trail and pounded truffles.

Next in richness, perhaps, comes the *Bécasse à la Périgueux* of Jules Gouffé, a member of a distinguished culinary family:

Truss two as for braising, put them in a stew-pan, cover with thin slices of fat bacon, add half a pint of Madeira and a pint of Mirepoix. When done, drain and untie them, dress on a dish so as to form a triangle, pour some Périgueux sauce reduced with essence of woodcock, and serve.

Fillets of snipe and woodcock are favourite French dishes. Here is Dubois' receipt for snipe :

To prepare this *hors-d'œuvre*, the fillets of seven or eight snipe must be removed, trimmed, and placed in a *sauté*-pan to be cooked with clarified butter. A *purée* is prepared with cooked legs of snipe, a few poultry livers, a small part of the giblets of game, some boiled rice, a little sauce and a piece of butter. The fillets are cooked just before sending to table, the *purée* is warmed without ebullition, and the cases filled up with the latter. On the *purée*, the fillet of a snipe is placed, then masked immediately with a little brown sauce, reduced with *fumet* of game.

Gouffé's receipt for fillets with *foies gras à la mamcelle* is scarcely to be recommended to dyspeptics :

Take fillets of five woodcock, trim and split them open in the thickness : spread a layer of *foie gras* forcemeat, mixed with d'Uxelles sauce inside the fillets and fold the sides to again : flatten them with the knife to stick the sides together. Butter a *sauté*-pan and put the fillets in it ; cover with a round of buttered paper and cook over a slow fire. Dish round a *croustade* filled with *foie gras* scallop. Reduce some Espagnole sauce with essence of woodcock ; mix in a tablespoonful of

chopped truffles cooked in Madeira and a tablespoonful of d'Uxelles sauce ; pour some of the sauce over the *foie gras* scallop and the fillets, and serve the remainder separately.

It will be observed that the great French chefs always recommend Madeira in place of red wines. The d'Uxelles sauce is less familiar to us in England than Espagnole. It is admirably adapted to snipe and plover, as well as woodcock, and is composed of mushrooms, parsley, and shalots stewed in a saucepan, holding a gill to each quart of Espagnole. The Espagnole is made of sliced onions and carrots steeped in white wine, and with white fish boiled and moistened in fish *consommé*, in the proportion of six pounds of the fish to five quarts of the *consommé*.

For fillets of woodcock or snipe with truffle *purée* : Remove the fillets of six of the one or a dozen of the other ; trim and put in a buttered saucepan ; add a little clarified butter and cover with buttered paper. Trim the *mignon* fillets, butter a *sauté*-pan ; put them in it with a dot of truffle on each. Cook the large fillets and dish round a *croustade*. Set the *mignon* fillets in an oven. Fill the *croustade* with truffle *purée* ; pour some essence of the woodcock or snipe over the fillets ; place the *mignon* fillets over them in a circle and serve.

Cases of snipe with truffles, says M. Dubois, is a dish as simple as it is coquettish and distinguished. The galantine should be brilliant, the truffles glazed, the jelly *croûtons* well trimmed, the jelly itself ought to be limpid, but rich. The snipes must be of the same form as the paper cases ; when cold they must be covered with a coating of *chaud-froid*, and put in paper cases, at the bottom of which is a coating of chopped aspic jelly. These are placed in the form of a *rosace* on an ornamented *pain-vert*, and laid against a strip of fat, slightly on the incline. The basis of the *pain-vert* is surrounded with fine aspic jelly *croûtons*. Snipes à la Dumanoir are trussed with their stomachs stuffed with forcemeat. They are larded, braized in stock and well glazed, then dished in an ornamental border of game forcemeat, masked with forcemeat and decorated. The intervals between the birds are filled with small bouquets of truffle. The border and the bottom of the dish are slightly masked with Espagnole sauce.

For *chaud-froid* of snipe, the snipes must be neither too fresh nor too high, fat and having the breasts free from gunshot. They must be roasted or baked, *bardées* and rather underdone. When cold, each is divided into five parts—legs, fillets, and breast piece. The legs, being small and dry, are

only used to fill empty spaces, so 'one must not be sparing in the number of snipe.' The parts must be well trimmed and covered with a rich and transparent *chaud-froid* sauce. The *chaud-froid* is dished on an aspic border. Galantine of snipe is 'one of the simplest, though most distinguished, dishes that can be served.' The snipe are boned, stuffed with a game forcemeat with truffles, rolled in oval form, and surrounded with a strip of buttered paper: they are cooked in little liquid (*mouillement*), left to cook in their stock, then divested of the paper, trimmed and masked with a brown *chaud-froid* sauce. When the sauce is cold, the galantines are coated with half-set aspic.

So much for the elaborate cookery, which may be suited to snipe and plover, which fly in wisps or flocks, but is altogether unworthy of the woodcock. Brillat-Savarin says the appropriate word on wines: *Ce mets de haute saveur doit être arrosé, par préférence, de vin du cru de la haute Bourgogne; j'ai dégagé cette vérité d'une suite d'observations qui m'ont coûté plus de travail qu'une table de logarithmes.*

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